University of Alberta

Teaching Awards in the Context of a Professional Learning Community

by

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Abstract

Within schools that are implementing a professional learning community (PLC) model, school administrators have a responsibility to ensure that a teacher awards program contributes positively to the school culture. This qualitative study addresses a relative absence of research on the suitability of a teacher awards program within a PLC. The purpose of this study was to investigate, using a case study interview process, the views of three teacher award recipients and their principals about the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program in Alberta as it impacts teaching practice and collegial relationships within their PLCs. The major findings of this study were that an awards program is an appropriate part of a PLC, it encourages risk taking and the deprivatization of teacher practice, and during the awards nomination and selection process, school administrators must be sensitive to the needs of all teachers within the school.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandson, Cole Robert Kerr Edwards, who was born and passed away while I was a graduate student. His presence in our lives taught my family a great deal about loving, grieving, and healing. Thank you, dear Cole, for your gentle touch in our lives.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The process of nominating and selecting teachers for awards that recognize outstanding practice has been part of the educational landscape for many years. "Recognizing good teachers is an important and simple technique (Hines, 1993)" (Gullatt & Bennett, 1995, p. 1). It is necessary for educators today to consider this awards process within the current context of schools as professional learning communities (PLCs). Recommendation 13 from the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning (Alberta Education, 2007c) is that every school operate as a PLC, and many schools in Alberta are seeking to implement a PLC model in which teachers work together with the goal of continuous improvement. School administrators have a responsibility to the members of their PLCs to ensure that an awards system contributes positively to the learning environment of the school and that the participation process is consistent with the goals of the school culture. The literature in the area of schools as PLCs is plentiful and diverse, but in the area of rewarding strong teacher performance with awards, the literature is limited. This unevenness supports the philosophy that teaching as a normative, egalitarian profession encourages the democratic principles of equality for all and discourages the placement of some participants either above or below others. Teacher education programs present public education as an ethical endeavour in which all participants are full and equal partners. School administrators are therefore charged with the responsibility of appropriately placing participation in the teacher awards process within the context of a PLC that has a normative, egalitarian culture.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the views of teacher award finalists and their principals about Alberta Education's (2007a) Excellence in Teaching Awards Program as it impacts their work in a PLC. The focus on collaboration in Alberta's educational system is demonstrated by the Alberta government's approval in 2005 of Recommendation 13 from Alberta's Commission on Learning (Alberta Education, 2007c), which supports the implementation of PLCs. In this research I attempted to place the current literature and the views of educators on teaching awards within the context of PLCs.

Research Question

The question that guided this research was as follows: Is a formal teacher awards program an appropriate fit within the culture of a school that is implementing a professional learning community model? Within the framework created by this overarching question, I developed the following four subquestions that further focused my research: How can a school administrator effectively implement an awards program to recognize teacher success within a PLC? Does teacher recognition through a formal awards process encourage the risk taking inherent in the PLC model? Does teacher recognition through a formal awards process further the goal of the deprivatization of teacher practice, which is part of the PLC model? Can an awards program be implemented to meet both individual and collective needs?

The objectives of this research project were (a) to interview three teacher award finalists and their principals about their experiences with the nomination and selection process, (b) to analyze the awards process and its impact on individual teaching practices in the school and on the collegial relationships within a PLC, (c) to review the literature

on teacher recognition within a PLC, and (d) to make recommendations about the future implementation of teacher award processes in schools.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this research lies in its potential to guide principals in their decision making on the current awards system in place in Alberta. A school principal does not choose whether or not to inform his or her school community of the awards program. Alberta Education's (2007a) Excellence in Teaching Awards Program already exists and is publicized to the citizens of Alberta through local papers, which often advertise the nomination process and publish stories about local recipients. Therefore, a principal of a school in Alberta needs to understand the culture of his or her school and needs to make informed decisions on the level and nature of participation of his or her school in the awards program. The principal must bring to that decision as much information as possible about the balance between promoting individual excellence and supporting the goals of a PLC based on the shared norms of equality and fairness. This research has the potential to contribute to that decision-making process.

This research brings to light the tension that exists within a school community when, although it is based on the ethics of equity and democracy, the community is given the opportunity to recognize one individual more than another. My exploration of this tension connected to the work of Cochran-Smith (1991), who described a teaching dilemma as a situation that presents two options, the elimination of either of which will have negative implications. Within the context of my research question, one option would be to recognize the outstanding work of individual teachers, and the other option would be, in the pursuit of equity, to treat all members of the teaching team exactly the

same. School administrators consider the elimination of either of these options unfavourable. The purpose of my research question was to investigate ways to support the work of school administrators as they grapple with the pressure created by wanting the best of both options within this dilemma.

Context

As an administrator of an elementary school in Alberta for the past 10 years, I have often faced the predicament of my desire to recognize individual teachers through a formal award process, and yet the need to work within the context of a school as an egalitarian institution and, more recently, within the context of a school as a PLC. I have felt quite conflicted as a school administrator between my instinct to celebrate the amazing talents and dedication of individual teachers and my desire to foster the goals of a PLC. I have seen first hand the enthusiasm with which a parent nominates a teacher, the joy that students feel when their teacher is selected, and the sense of pride that the selected teacher exudes. I want to continue to foster this excitement in members of my school community, but I also want to ensure that it does not take away from the cohesiveness of the PLC model.

My experience with the role of the principal within Alberta's Excellence in Teaching Awards Program has been a learning process. During my 10 years as principal of an elementary school in Alberta, I have supported teachers in the nomination process 28 times, and five teachers at my school have been named recipients of the provincial award. My role as the supporting principal has evolved over this 10-year period, and I have come to view the nomination, not so much as an event, but more as a collaborative process that involves many steps.

In my first year as a principal I took a very minor role in the nomination process. On the school display counter in the office, I placed Alberta Education's printed material that had been delivered to the school on the awards. A few days later a parent approached me about nominating a teacher. I wrote a letter of support for the nominated teacher and submitted it to the parent who was coordinating the nomination. The parent then put together the nomination package and mailed it to the selection committee. Although not selected as a finalist, that teacher was very pleased at being nominated.

After that first year I began to take a more active role in the nomination process. First, I decided to use the nomination as an opportunity to ask the nominated teacher to share with me highlights of his or her practice through discussion and observation in the classroom. I then used the list of selection criteria as a basis for the discussion with the teacher and began to watch for those particular characteristics of practice while I was observing.

Second, I met with the teacher whom the nominated teacher had asked to write a letter of support. Together we looked over the selection criteria and discussed the qualities upon which it would be appropriate for the colleague to focus. I provided release time for the supporting colleague to allow him or her an opportunity to spend time in the nominated teacher's classroom observing and writing the letter of support.

Third, I met with the nominating parent and discussed the selection criteria. We chose those areas of teacher practice upon which the parent would feel most qualified to comment, and I prompted the parent to be specific and give details of the teacher's practice that spoke to particular selection criteria.

Fourth, I wrote my letter of support, focusing on the selection criteria that the colleague or parent had not highlighted and upon which I felt best situated as a principal

to comment. Last, I gathered letters of support for each nomination, gave the nominated teacher a duplicate copy of the package for his or her personal portfolio, placed a copy of the package in the teacher's personnel file at school, and then mailed the original package to the selection committee.

A further context for this study is my experience as a graduate student in the Master of Education program in educational policy studies. During my graduate coursework my personal sense of conflict between individual recognition and team cohesiveness has deepened. I have learned about the need for leaders to build relationships and personalize recognition (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 12) and about the need for extrinsic incentives and rewards (Gordon, 2004, p. 101). I have also learned about successful organizations that have a holistic perspective that promotes "a strong egalitarian atmosphere, a community of equals who work co-operatively on common goals rather than relying on the formal hierarchy" (Hoy & Miskel, 2005, p. 168) and about schools as PLCs in which groups of co-workers share a vision and a common understanding that holds the members together (Mitchell & Sackney, 2003, p. 2). I wanted to more fully understand this perceived tension from the views of both teachers and administrators who have gone through the nomination steps together. I believe that there is a great deal to be learned by talking to teachers and administrators who have experience with the Excellence in Teaching Award program in Alberta.

The final components of the context for this study were my own assumptions and biases about the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. Wellington (2000) recognized the need for researcher to be cognizant of their own personal stance on the research topic:

> One of the roles of any researcher in education is to examine and question the positions or assumptions which are often taken for granted:
> 1. The first task, as discussed above, is to question any assumptions about yourself: your own values, ideas, knowledge, motivation and prejudices. For example, What's my own position in relation to this research? What are my relevant past experiences and prior knowledge? Am I carrying a bias, a prejudice, or insider information which will affect my role as a researcher? (pp. 43-44)

Therefore, based on the need that Wellington identified, I took some time to reflect to uncover my own assumptions. From my experience as a principal in a school, I assumed that it was my responsibility to advertise the nomination process to the parents in my school, and that it was also my responsibility to support all ensuing nominations of teachers from parents with letters of recommendation. I also assumed that I should not draw a great deal of attention to the nominated teachers within my school to avoid making the other teachers feel unappreciated and creating a sense of competitiveness among teachers. Additionally, I assumed that it was necessary to encourage nominations to impress the public and to increase the positive image of the school in my community. Finally, I had a bias that recognition and celebration inspire teachers to perform better. It is important to those who read this study to understand that my self-awareness made me sensitive to the researcher effect to which Wellington (2000) referred: "An alternative is to acknowledge the effect of the researcher, accept the impossibility of a neutral stance, and to bury finally the myth of the 'neutral observer'" (p. 42). It was, in fact, my thoughts and experiences about the awards program that drew me to investigate the topic of this research study.

> In Wolcott's (1995, p. 186) terms, every researcher has a healthy bias: I regard bias as entry-level theorizing, a thought-about position from which the researcher as inquirer feels drawn to an issue or problem and seeks to construct a firmer basis in both knowledge and understanding. (p. 42)

Therefore, uncovering my assumptions was an important process because it motivated me to go beyond my own experience and seek the perspectives of award-winning teachers and their principals.

Thesis Organization

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 detailed the purpose of the study, the research question, and the context that guided the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature and is organized around four headings: the teaching profession, schools as PLCs, rewards in teaching, and the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. This literature review begins with definitions of the following terms that I have used in the study: *teacher*, *teaching profession*, *PLC*, *school culture*, *reward*, and *excellence*. Chapter 3 includes a description of and rationale for the methodology used in this study, including an explanation of the selection of participants, the data sources, and the data analysis. Chapter 4 contains the stories of three Alberta teachers who were nominated and selected as finalists in the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and the stories of the three principals of those teachers. Chapter 5 outlines the four themes that emerged from the stories in chapter 4. Chapter 6 presents an overview of my research study, the findings, the implications for practice, the recommendations for further research, and my personal reflections.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review is structured around four key headings. The first two headings, which investigate teaching as an egalitarian, normative profession and schools as PLCs, indicate the great depth of those topics in the current literature. The third heading, Rewards in Teaching, highlights a lack of literature and indicates a need that this research project can help to fulfill. The fourth heading presents informational material and background on Alberta's Excellence in Teaching Awards Program.

I began this literature review by investigating the use of literature within a qualitative study. It became clear to me that, because my research design was qualitative and I needed to use case studies, I would have to be careful to ensure that I conducted the literature review inductively to avoid directing my questioning of the interview subjects (Creswell, 2003). A number of options must be considered in the location of the literature review within a study, according to Creswell:

> Consider the most appropriate place for the literature in a qualitative study and base the decision on the audience for the project. Keep in mind placing it at the beginning to 'frame' the problem, placing it in a separate section, and using it at the end of a study to compare and contrast with the findings. (p. 24)

I decided to include a separate section for the literature review early in the study, and then I incorporated related literature into the outcomes and themes at the conclusion to place my findings in the context of the literature.

I started my literature review when I first considered this topic of an awards system within the model of a PLC, and I continued it throughout my final coursework

and during the fieldwork. This literature review starts with a list of five definitions. I began by defining my use of the terms *teacher* and *teaching profession* for the purposes of this study and then conducted an investigation into the definition of *PLC*. To further lay the groundwork for this study, I explored the concept of *culture* within a school, which must be acknowledged and examined to understand the work that goes on in it. The fourth term that I define is *rewards in teaching*, and the last is *excellence* as it applies to Alberta Education's teacher award process. Because the purpose of this study was to place the awards process within the culture of a PLC, I then organized my literature review under the following four headings: (a) The Teaching Profession, (b) Schools as Professional Learning Communities, (c) Rewards in Teaching, and (d) The Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. The first two headings, which view schools as collaborative cultures, create the context for the third heading of recognizing performance beyond the norm. The fourth heading describes the teaching awards program that the Alberta government has created. These four areas that I investigated are based on my experience as a school principal and on my coursework and research in educational leadership. The literature review begins with the definitions of the terms that I have used.

Definitions

Teacher and Teaching Profession

In this research study I have used the terms *teacher* and *teaching profession* as they are defined in the Alberta School Act (Alberta Education, 1988). This legislation defines a teacher as "an individual who holds a certificate of qualification as a teacher issued under this Act" (section 1.1.ii). The certificate of qualification requires four years

of university education, including a degree and a basic teacher preparation program from an institution acceptable to the Alberta Minister of Education. This requirement is stated in Alberta Education's Certification of Teachers Regulations (Alberta Education, 2007b). The teaching profession in Alberta is governed by the belief, as stated in the School Act, that "the best educational interests of the student are the paramount considerations in the exercise of any authority under this Act" (Preamble). All members of the teaching profession in Alberta are required by this legislation to recognize that they have the responsibility to serve the educational interests of the children in their care.

Professional Learning Community

Because this study is situated in Alberta schools, the most significant definition for a PLC comes from the Alberta government. Alberta's Commission on Learning (Alberta Education, 2007c) reported that "in professional learning communities, teachers and school administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn" (p. 66). One characteristic of a PLC listed in the Commission's report is "a supportive environment including adequate resources and policies that foster collaboration, effective communication and staff development" (p. 66).

School Culture

Hoy and Miskel (2005) defined *culture* as "the shared work orientations of participants; it gives the organization special identity" (p. 24). They saw a school as a social system with a structure set up to meet the organization's needs, within which are the individuals who have defined roles and the energy and capacity to move the organization towards its goals. Therefore, the culture of a school is created through the joint orientation of the participating individuals as they move toward the formal expectations. Hoy and Miskel elaborated on this: "As organizational members interact,

shared values, norms, beliefs, and ways of thinking emerge" (p. 27). It is significant to the study of an awards process within a school to understand this concept of school culture, knowing that teachers shape the underlying values of the school. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2005) explained, "The concept of culture helps us reexamine schools as places of human community with peculiar histories and stories" (p. 15). A school's experiences with an awards system will be a part of those histories and stories to which Glickman et al. referred.

Reward

The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language (Cayne et al., 1988) defines *reward* as "something given or promised in recognition of service rendered" (p. 852). Therefore, I will use the term reward to refer to that which a teacher receives to recognize teaching service.

Excellence

The Alberta Education's Excellence in Teaching Awards (Alberta Education, 2007a) selection committee defined *excellence* as the condition of teachers' demonstration of the following teaching characteristics: "knowledge of subject matter, effectiveness with students, creative and innovative teaching practices, involvement with parents, and collaboration with colleagues" (p. 1). The selection committee further defined excellence within its criteria for choosing recipients of the awards:

- fostering the development of students and their intellectual, social, emotional and physical growth
- establishing a stimulating learning environment
- motivating students to exceed their own expectations
- attending to individual student needs
- working collaboratively with colleagues
- demonstrating an in-depth knowledge of subject matter and curriculum
- being involved in professional growth activities

- achieving positive results in student learning
- demonstrating caring for the well-being of students and colleagues, thereby contributing to a positive school climate. (p. 7)

In this study I used the above criteria to refer to the quality of excellence in the act of teaching.

The Four Headings

The Teaching Profession

The ideals of democracy have always been the foundation of education in Alberta, and the teaching profession's members and society view it as an egalitarian, normative institution. This reflects the work of John Dewey (1916/1944) who emphasized the need for an egalitarian approach that does not allow the interests of the most powerful or dominant individual to be served. Historically, education has taken an egalitarian approach to a teacher's career path within the profession. Lortie's (1975) early work described teaching as having an unstaged career path that regards teachers as equals: "The incentive system is not organized to respond to variations in effort and talent among classroom teachers" (p. 99). Glickman et al. (2005) supported this observation much later: "Teaching, on the other hand, has been unstaged from entry to exit" (p. 23). Typically, no distinctions are made between beginning teachers and veterans; in many terms of employment, they are treated equally: According to Glickman et al.:

> The 20-year veteran teacher has the same classroom space, number of students, and requirements as the first-year teacher. Furthermore, for each year of experience, a teacher realizes a salary increase identical to that received by all others of comparable experience. (p. 23)

Starratt (1991) talked about an *ethic of justice* that ensures equitable and inclusionary school practices.

In the area of teacher preparation, Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) have helped potential teachers to understand that "education must serve the purposes of a democracy" (p. 10). They saw teaching as an egalitarian profession that focuses on an equitable sharing of experience rather than on the specialness of any one participant. "It is important for teachers to understand their roles and responsibilities as professionals in schools that must prepare all students for equitable participation in a democratic society" (p. 11). Bransford et al. compared teaching to other professions to further this sense of togetherness. They saw teachers less as individuals and more significantly as a group of professionals: "Unlike solo professionals such as architects and accountants who can, if they choose, hang out a shingle and practice their trade, the work of educators in schools is greater than the sum of their individual parts" (p. 13). Teachers have traditionally seen their work more as a group calling and less as an individualistic job.

In their work on the school as a normative culture, Hoy and Miskel (2005) described schools as successful organizations that have a holistic perspective that promotes "a strong egalitarian atmosphere, a community of equals who work co-operatively on common goals rather than relying on the formal hierarchy" (p. 168). These authors also described schools as normative organizations in which behavioural norms are "usually unwritten and informal expectations that occur just below the surface of experience" (p. 166). They included in the norms of schools the expectations that teachers will support their colleagues and balance self-interest with the goals of the organization.

Phillip Schlechty's (2005) implication in his discussion of norms in his work on continuous innovation and improvement is that effective systemic change involves the

communal moving ahead together of all staff, not of individuals who excel above others: "Conformity to norms is essential to life in schools, just as it is in other organizations. Norms provide a basis on which members of the school community can judge what is expected of them and what others can be counted on to do" (p. 38). Therefore, it is very clear in the literature that the norm of collegial support is very important and that conformity to that norm is an important expectation for teachers that they must balance with their individual needs and self-interests.

Schools as Professional Learning Communities

The school as a PLC model is a dominant theme in the current educational literature, and this model heavily emphasizes the value of a collaborative school culture. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) described a PLC as "a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning" (p. 8). Their later work in the area of schools as PLCs has been predicated on the idea that the best strategy for school improvement is to view school-based educators as a community of learners who are in control of their professional development and teaching practice. Mitchell and Sackney's (2003) model of a learning community also involves a group of co-workers who share a vision or a common understanding that holds the members together. These authors believed that a school that is a learning community is better served by horizontal than vertical stratification. Building a learning community requires a "wholeness model of reality that considers interconnections, mutual influences, and dynamic relationships" (p. 1).

Sarah Mason (2003) summarized many of the explanations of a PLC in the current literature as follows:

> The common attributes of school learning organizations and professional learning communities provide the structure and culture conducive to organizational learning by focusing on the following: teaching and learning; collaboration among staff and with external partners; inquiry-based learning and reflection, shared values, norms, and dispositions of teachers, and a commitment to continuous improvement. (p. 6)

Mason addressed the motivational needs of staff: "How the school organizes and increases its human and social resources—such as innovation, leadership, respect, feedback, and staff development—also influences the makeup of professional community" (p. 5). This expansion of her definition further sets the context for awards within the culture of a PLC.

DuFour and Eaker's (1998) work in the area of a school as a learning community presents the basic structure as composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals. Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) described learning organizations as characterized by shared norms and values with collaboration, deprivatization, and reflective dialogue. When schools have this organizational culture, an environment is created in which teachers are grounded by their shared values, beliefs, and dispositions (Louis et al., 1996).

In conclusion, the literature review in the area of PLCs indicates a number of recurring characteristics. This model focuses on teaching and learning through collaboration, reflective practice, shared norms, and the opening up of the teaching act.

Rewards in Teaching

I began this section of the literature review by looking for work on the use of teaching awards. With the assistance of the Alberta Teachers' Association's (ATA's) library staff and the staff of the H. T. Coutts Library in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, I began to realize that very little research is available on teaching

awards. I decided to expand my search to include the term *rewards* and found some literature that can be generalized to inform the study of teaching awards. Some literature supports and some literature disputes using rewards to recognize and reward strong performance. I looked first at the supporting literature on the use of a reward process to identify and celebrate strong performance and then at the literature that discourages the use of incentives or rewards for better performance. Given the scarcity of empirical research in the area of teacher awards, I relied on a review of summative literature to build the context for my study.

Stephen Gordon (2004) explained the need for collegial feedback for a teacher, which could come in the form of support for a teaching award. He described the benefits of a fully functioning collaborative culture, which he characterized as having "mutual acceptance, trust, openness, sharing, support, and recognition" (p. 160). In this work Gordon criticized a type of school culture that he called the "culture of individualism" (p. 159), within which there is little room for teachers to nominate each other for awards or otherwise celebrate each others' strengths. Gordon stated, "In the conventional school, teachers almost never observe each other teaching and receive little feedback or support from other professionals" (p. 159) and emphasized what he saw as the lack of opportunity for collegial support: "The only feedback they typically receive is from their students. Such limited, unreliable feedback leads to teachers' uncertainty about their instructional practice" (p. 160). Sarah Mason (2003) reinforced the idea of formal recognition as motivating: "The fourth area of need teachers identified in our interviews related to incentives and supports" (p. 23). Mason explains, "This active support and recognition of hard work and progress on the part of administration became a type of incentive for the

team to learn and grow" (p. 23). The literature certainly promotes the need for teachers to feel recognized and supported by their school community.

Sederberg's (1990) work on identifying motivation and organizational incentives for exemplary classroom teaching performance espouses the role of the principal in the award process as an observer in a teacher's classroom who can then write a letter of support for the nomination: "An unexpected but prevalent theme was that high vitality teachers wanted regular monitoring and supervision. Good supervision reinforced their desire to excel and provided opportunity for recognition" (p. 11). Sederberg extended his support for incentives: "Expressions of appreciation, apart from monetary gain, were important to high vitality teachers" (p. 11). He quoted one of the teachers in his study: "'We have little awards at the end of the year. Again, it's just where teachers get pins, and they're recognized. You wouldn't believe what that means to people. It's funny. It doesn't take very much'" (p. 11). Again, there is significant support in the literature for the concept of recognition motivating and energizing teachers.

Paul Chance's (1992) work on rewards used for students in classrooms also has application to the use of rewards for teachers. Chance reviewed the literature on different kinds of classroom rewards and concluded that "rewards reduce motivation when they are given without regard to performance or when the performance standard is so high that students frequently fail" (p. 204). He supported the use of a particular type of reward: "Success-contingent rewards are given for good performance and might reflect either success or progress toward a goal. Success-contingent rewards do not have negative effects; in fact, they typically increase interest in the rewarded activity" (p. 204). The Alberta Excellence in Teaching Award program is an example of a success-contingent reward in that it recognizes strong teaching performance, not just the attainment of a

standard. In many school districts teachers receive a long-service award after every five years of teaching. However, I see this as an example of the attainment of a standard that does little to motivate teachers to perform better; whereas, according to Chance, an Excellence in Teaching Award is a success-contingent reward because it celebrates teachers' demonstration of criteria that define excellent performance.

Alfie Kohn's (1993) work on the negative effects of rewards in classrooms also informs this study on the effects of rewards for teachers. Kohn cited four reasons that rewards fail: rewards punish, rewards rupture relationships, rewards ignore reasons, and rewards discourage risk taking. His argument in the area of disrupted relationships has perhaps the greatest application to this study: "At best, rewards do nothing to promote this collaboration or a sense of community. More often, they actually interfere with these goals: an undercurrent of 'strifes and jealousies' is created whenever people scramble for goodies" (p. 55). Kohn argued that the limited number of finalists and winners of excellence awards each year in Alberta has a negative impact on the school community: "Of all the ways by which people are led to seek rewards, I believe the most destructive possible arrangement is to limit the number that is available" (p. 55). He concluded his argument with the statement, "If the reward system sets people up as one another's rivals, the predictable result is that each will view the others with suspicion and hostility and, depending on their relative status, perhaps with contempt or envy as well" (p. 55).

I have included Alfie Kohn's (1993) work because it is part of the educational landscape within which teachers work and because it speaks to the tension I mentioned in chapter 1 with regard to recognizing excellent teacher performance within a normative, egalitarian culture. I believe that effective teachers are very sensitive to the use of classroom rewards, and they understand the need to be cautious about the potential

negative effects that Kohn mentioned of rupturing relationships and lowering risk-taking behaviours. Based on what I had learned over my 10 years as a principal who has implemented the Alberta awards process, I believed when I started this study that it was possible for the awards program to operate positively within a school culture if the principal uses the same sensitivity that teachers use in utilizing classroom rewards. I was motivated to undertake this study because I wanted to learn from other participants in the awards program whether or not Kohn's concerns about classrooms rewards were applicable to the realm of teacher awards.

Alberta's Excellence in Teaching Awards Program

The final heading of the literature review addresses the background of the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program in Alberta. In 1985 in Alberta a Ministerial Order established the Council on Alberta Teaching Standards (COATS), whose mandate was "to provide advice and recommendations to the Minister on matters related to teaching, including: teacher certification; teacher preparation, induction, and professional growth; practice review; excellence in teaching; and other matters of interest to the Minister" (COATS, 2007b, ¶ 1). COATS included excellence in teaching in its mandate and recommended that the Minister of Education establish the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. "The program was implemented as an annual program to: recognize outstanding Alberta teachers; honour creative, innovative and effective teaching; focus public attention on the teaching profession; and, involve Albertans in celebrating teaching excellence" (COATS, 2007a, ¶ 1). The rationale for the program is as follows:

> This program provides Albertans with a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the many contributions teachers make to student learning. Parents, teacher-colleagues, principals, superintendents and all Albertans are encouraged to show

> appreciation by nominating an outstanding teacher or principal for an Excellence in Teaching Award. (Alberta Education, 2007a, p. 1)

F. Burghardt (personal communication, July 27, 2007), the Director of Teacher Development and Certification who was with Alberta Education from 1993 to 2003 and was responsible for COATS, described to me the intent of the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. From its inception the program was designed to recognize outstanding teachers, not with the view of discriminating one from another, but to highlight or showcase exemplary teaching. This description made it very clear that the use of the term *award recipient* instead of *award winner* was intended to bring to the attention of school communities and the public many examples of excellent teachers rather than to rank one teacher against another. Burghardt stated:

> The idea was that the recipients, which was the word that was always used as opposed to awards winners or any reference to winners, were exemplars or models to the thousands of teachers in the province. This fits with the concept of a professional learning community of equals and so does the intent that the award recipients at the provincial level be given opportunities to get together before and after the awards ceremony to share their particular contributions and areas of teaching expertise.

The Excellence in Teaching Award Program (Alberta Education, 2007a) requires that the nomination package include letters of support for the nominated teacher from a teacher colleague, a public member (usually a student or parent), and the nominated teacher's principal. The process of gathering these letters of support and of communicating to the school community the progress of the nomination generally falls to the principal or principal designate.

The Excellence in Teaching Awards Program (Alberta Education, 2007a) defines *teacher* as required in the Alberta School Act (Alberta Government, 2007). The criteria listed in the nomination package for eligibility to be nominated are as follows:

- holds a permanent Alberta teaching certificate at the time of the nomination; and
- taught courses of study and education programs (or supported the teaching of these) authorized by the School Act during the current school year; and
- works directly with students in a school setting on a daily basis (may be a principal or other certificated staff member). (Alberta Education, 2007a, p. 5)

The Selection Committee gathers together representatives from stakeholder groups that have interests in the educational process. The committee consists of representatives from Alberta Education, the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, the Alberta School Boards Association, the ATA, the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, COATS, and the Universities Co-ordinating Council (COATS, 2007b, ¶ 4). It is noteworthy that the committee includes representatives from the universities because, as I mentioned in the earlier discussion of teaching as an egalitarian, normative institution, the teaching preservice programs at universities emphasize to potential teachers the importance of an equitable sharing of experience rather than of the specialness of any one participant. (Bransford et al., 2005). Perhaps the participation of university representatives on the selection committees indicates an acceptance on the part of the teacher preparation institutions of the appropriateness of a teacher awards program within the egalitarian, normative teaching profession.

The awards program uses a set of criteria for review by those people involved in the nomination and writing the letters of support. The criteria for selection as listed in the nomination package are as follows:

A. How the nominee's teaching or leadership excels at:
   - fostering the development of students and their intellectual, social, emotional and physical growth
   - establishing a stimulating learning environment
   - motivating students to exceed their own expectations

- attending to individual student needs
- working collaboratively with colleagues
- demonstrating an in-depth knowledge of subject matter and curriculum
- being involved in professional growth activities
- achieving positive results in student learning
- demonstrating caring for the well-being of students and colleagues, thereby contributing to a positive school climate

-AND-

B. How the nominee's teaching or leadership is innovative or creative in supporting student learning in one or more of the areas identified under Section A. (Alberta Education, 2007a, p. 7)

The above criteria reflect many of the characteristics of members of a PLC, as I mentioned in my literature review on schools as PLCs. The two selection criteria that focus on working collaboratively with colleagues and on the well-being of colleagues reflect the work of Mitchell and Sackney (2003), in which they described a PLC as having a "wholeness model of reality that considers interconnections, mutual influences, and dynamic relationships" (p. 1). In their earlier work, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) supported two other awards-selection criteria that describe teachers as fostering whole-child development and a stimulating learning environment; they described members of a learning community as having a learning-oriented and growth-promoting approach. The selection criterion that describes an excellent teacher as being involved in professional growth activities is reflected in Sarah Mason's (2003) work on the PLC model, in which she emphasized the teacher's commitment to continuous improvement and the school's investment in staff development. Mason also stressed the importance of innovation in a PLC, which is given significance in the selection criterion as a separate 'Section B' (Alberta Education, 2007a, p. 7).

This criterion that focuses on the use of creativity and innovation in excellent teaching practice is a relatively recent addition to the selection criteria and is consistent

with the principles of a PLC of teachers who work towards continuous improvement. F. Burghardt (personal communication, July 27, 2007) explained the evolution of the criteria over the last few years:

> The qualifications have changed a bit over the years. For example, we have tried to de-emphasize the extracurricular activities—not to ignore them, but to recognize them as teaching qualities within the big picture. Most recipients are very active in their schools, getting involved in many activities so that it became somewhat of a common denominator. Innovation and working with other teachers became valued criteria. Recipients see that innovation and collaboration are valued, and, therefore, they become less reluctant to take risks in the future.

Although this was a minor adjustment, Burghardt was clear that the selection criteria changed to reflect an emphasis on innovation and collaboration.

In concluding this section of my literature review of the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program, I would like to point out that the program does not provide a handbook or manual for principals on the implementation of the awards process within a school community. The nomination package contains detailed information for the nominator on the intent, deadlines, contents of the package, and eligibility and selection criteria. However, the program does not guide or advise principals on how to incorporate the program into the existing school culture. F. Burghardt (personal communication, July 27, 2007) addressed the unevenness with which schools participate in the awards program:

> Some schools and jurisdictions are more proactive in nominating teachers and celebrating accomplishments than others. The awards are set up to recognize excellence within communities, so it is up to the community to participate if they so choose. The program provides an opportunity to nominate, but it is not a requirement. School communities decide for themselves.

I feel that the tension that the implementation of an awards system creates for schools is partially a result of the inconsistency to which Burghardt referred. Although school

administrators value the autonomy of individual schools, they may also feel the need for guidelines for the implementation of the awards system that would involve a similar nomination and package preparation process across the province.

Summary

My review of the literature illustrates that situating an awards process that uses a PLC model within the egalitarian, normative teaching profession raises questions about how to maintain a balance between honouring the democratic principle of teachers as a community of equals who work collaboratively and recognize outstanding individual teacher performance. This review began with an examination of the foundations of the teaching profession, which are grounded in the values of democracy and equality in which all participants work co-operatively as equals. I then explored the concept of a PLC model that highlights teachers' working interdependently towards a shared vision or goal. In the third section of this literature review I investigated research on the use of teaching awards. Because of the lack of material available on teaching awards, I expanded my search to include rewards in teaching, and I added to this section literature on the use of recognition and celebration of strong performance in teaching. The last section of the literature review provided background information on the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program in Alberta, including the inception of the program, the selection criteria, and the nomination process.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

A Qualitative Procedure

In this research project I undertook a qualitative study, which John W. Creswell (2003) defined as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1-2). Because my review of the literature revealed little information on teaching awards programs in a PLC, I chose a qualitative study to hear the voices of educators and learn about their stories. Creswell (2003) explained that the advantages of conducting a qualitative study is that the work is exploratory, investigates a topic about which not much has been studied, and allows the researcher to listen to the participants and build a picture based on their responses. As I began to investigate my research question, I realized that the richest source of data would be the experiences of teachers and principals who have participated in the awards process.

My methodological approach for this research project was constructivist, which assumes multiple socially constructed realities and involves an interactive link between the researcher and participants (Mertens, 1998, p. 8). I used a case study approach (Merriam, 1998) and chose three teacher finalists and each of their principals. I chose this approach for a number of reasons, the first of which was that my research was guided by a 'how' subquestion, for which Merriam stated the case study has a clear advantage. Second, my research focused on process, to which case study is particularly suited; and third, my literature review revealed little about teacher awards programs, and case study

is helpful when there is little access to knowledge about the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam, 1998).

Trustworthiness

Both Merriam (1998) and Creswell (2003) discussed the importance of establishing the quality of trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Merriam described research results as trustworthy if there is some accounting for their validity and reliability. To establish trustworthiness, Creswell also indicated that the researcher must address the issues of internal validity, external validity, and reliability. Merriam advised that asking good questions in an interview is very important to obtain data that will have the qualities that ensure trustworthiness.

In terms of internal validity, Creswell (2003) stressed that the researcher must allow for triangulation by finding convergence among sources of information, a variety of investigators, or different methods of collecting data. For this qualitative study my research supervisor, Dr. Rosemary Foster, reviewed my data analysis and offered feedback on my conclusions. This process provided internal validity by fulfilling the function that Creswell described when he explained that another researcher will be able to create an inspection trail of the major decisions made during the research investigation and ensure that they were good decisions. I also addressed internal validity through the process of receiving feedback from the informants, to which Creswell referred as *member checks*. I analyzed the data gathered in the first interview step to assist me in developing the second set of interview questions. I then shared my analysis of the first set of interview questions with each respondent to check for accuracy before I began the second

interview. At that time I also discussed with them my interpretations of themes that I could see emerging, again as a perception check.

Merriam (1998) addressed the external validity of qualitative research with a discussion of generalizability and qualitative research. She saw external validity as being established by readers' determination of the fit of the study's context with their own situations, which is a measure of its generalizability. To increase the chances of a fit for readers of a study, Merriam suggested providing enough deep description so that they can judge how closely their circumstances match the research situation. I feel that the depth of my participant teachers' and principals' descriptions of their situations and experiences gives readers of this study an opportunity to gauge the fit against their own circumstances. Merriam also saw the generalizability increasing when the researcher chooses situations that are typical or comparable with others so that readers can make comparisons with their own situations. To address this factor of external validity, I chose schools whose teachers and principals described them as typical of the conventional elementary and high school settings in Alberta currently in the early stages of implementing the PLC model.

Creswell (2003) also looked at the external validity of qualitative research from a slightly different perspective when he discussed the purpose of qualitative research as being not always to generalize findings, but rather to create new understandings of events. I hope that this study will bring some new understandings to the process of participating in teacher awards programs given the context of PLCs. Creswell suggested that qualitative research can address reliability or the replication of a study and that the more statements included in the study about the researcher's assumptions, biases, and values, the greater the study's chances of being generalizable to other settings. I

addressed reliability by stating my biases and assumptions and by randomly selecting my participants from Alberta Education's published list of award recipients.

I addressed the issue that Merriam (1998) raised about asking good questions in a number of ways (Appendix A). I very carefully worded my questions, avoiding jargon and technical terms. I asked a question about how the teachers *felt* about their awards experience to elicit more affective information, and I used a hypothetical question (Merriam, 1998): "Suppose I am a teacher finalist at this school. What would my experience be like?" This type of question encourages respondents to describe what it was actually like for them (Merriam, 1998). I also asked a devil's-advocate question (Merriam, 1998): "Some people would say that the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program does not belong in a school that has as one of its goals being a PLC. What would you say to them?" This type of question helps to depersonalize the issue and "is particularly good to use when the topic is controversial and you want respondents' opinions and feelings" (p. 77). I included an ideal-position question (Merriam, 1998): "What do you think the ideal teacher award program would be like?" because, as Merriam explained, "Ideal position questions elicit both information and opinion; these can be used with virtually any phenomenon under study. They are good to use in evaluation studies because they reveal both positives and negatives or shortcomings of a program" (p. 78). Merriam also recommended asking an interpretive question: "Would you say the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program is an appropriate way to celebrate and recognize teacher success?" because "interpretive questions provide a check on what you think you are understanding, as well as provide an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed" (p. 78). Finally, to check that my questions would result in good data, I practiced the interviewing process with a volunteer

respondent. Merriam contended that "pilot interviews are crucial to trying out your questions" (p. 75), and I felt more confident during my first official interview.

The words of Dan Lortie (1975) allayed my concerns that the limitations of the interview questions would compromise my analysis and generalizations:

> Understanding the subjective world of people within a given field of work calls for long, detailed, and open-ended interviews which are costly in time and money: the benefits of intensity are purchased at the cost of scope. Yet it is surprising how much one can learn about an occupation without using complex measures. p. xix)

Lortie explained, "It is useful to limit one's control over responses; consequently, this study relies greatly on open-ended inquiry which lets teachers describe their world in their own language" (p. xix). I am confident that my semistructured interview format in which I involved a small number of respondents created an open-ended inquiry that allowed my interview subjects to speak in their authentic voices.

Selection of Participants

I chose to interview three Alberta teachers who had within the previous two years been nominated for an Excellence in Teaching Award and had been chosen as finalists. I also chose to interview the principals of each of these three teachers at the time of their nomination. The list of finalists published by the awards program on its website was the source of names. I narrowed the list of finalists to teachers who lived within driving distance for me and who represented a variety of grade levels. Once I had received research approval from the Faculties of Education and Extension and the Augustana Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta, I began to contact the principals of the finalist teachers. At this point I decided that I wanted to interview teacher and principal pairings who had been together at the time of the nomination and were still

together at the time of the interviews. If the principal was interested in participating and if the teacher was still teaching at that school, then I proceeded to contact the teacher. I was not able to choose some of my initial principal contacts because the teachers were no longer working at the same school.

I based my decision to involve participants in pairings that were still intact on my assumption that this would add thickness to my data (Stake, 2000). In his discussion of case studies, Stake noted that learning from a particular case is enhanced when the description includes the different perceptions of staff on the same topic. Therefore, I assumed that if the teacher and principal had shared the same nomination event, then the interview data would be richer. This was based on my assumption that they would have had the occasion over time to further discuss their experiences, and I wanted to present in narrative form two accounts of the same event to allow me to raise questions or confirm similarities that would help to answer my research question.

To ensure that the participants were sufficiently different, I made the final selections from the list based on a number of factors. Therefore, from the pool of finalists contacted, I chose two female teachers and one male. Of those three, one was a high school teacher, and the other two were elementary teachers. One teacher had taught for 25 years, one for 18 years, and one for 4 years. One principal had been a principal for 15 years, one for 5 years, and one for 2 years. All six participants were enthusiastic contributors, very interested in the research project, and very willing to share their stories.

The three schools in which the six interview subjects worked are all in a small urban setting of about 60,000 people. In my initial contact, each participating principal told me that the school community was familiar with the PLC model. For the past eight

years, including the year of the interviews, all three schools had been participating in professional development projects funded by Alberta Education's Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), which involved, to some extent, work with the PLC model.

Data Sources

My most significant source of data for this study was the interviews of the six participants, each of whom I interviewed on two separate occasions; in total, I conducted 12 semistructured interviews. Wellington (2000) described the advantages of the interview approach as follows:

> Interviewing allows a researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe. We can probe an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings, and perspectives. We can also elicit their version or their account of situations which they may have lived or taught through his—or her—story. (p. 71)

I used a semistructured interview format, which "may involve a checklist of issues to be covered, or even a checklist of questions" (p. 75). This focused/semistructured interview schedule specifies key areas to be discussed but does not fix the order of questions.

The interview method to collect data allowed me to probe the minds of the participants to learn what they thought about the awards process. "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (Merriam, 1998, p. 71). Using the selection process that I previously discussed, I chose three teachers who had been nominated and selected as finalists in the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and their principals at that time and conducted interviews during May and June 2007. I held two interview sessions with each respondent, and each lasted about 45 minutes. I asked for permission from the

interviewees to tape-record the sessions. Based on Wellington's (2000) discussion and tables (p. 86) on the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing, I felt that using a semistructured, taped interview would result in rich data. Because I was conducting case studies of a few teachers and principals, the interview format would help me to delve deep into their thought processes. "Interviewing is also the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals, as Bateson (1990) did in interviewing five women for her book, *Composing a Life*" (Merriam, 1998, p. 72). It became very clear during the interviews of the small number of individuals whom I had selected that they were, in fact, sharing their innermost thoughts; and I felt honoured to be privy to their reflections on the awards process.

I kept a reflective journal during this research project; it was a detailed record of my thoughts and wonderings throughout this study, and I made notes in it while I was recording the interviews. I also used the journal to record my thoughts as I reflected back on each interview. The journal gave me the opportunity to watch the evolution of themes as they emerged from the responses of the participants.

I also had an important meeting that made a significant contribution to this study. I met with a representative from Alberta Education who was a member of COATS, which administers the awards program. During this meeting I made notes in my reflective journal.

A final source of data collection was the documents from which I obtained information about the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and the list of finalists. These documents are available to the public, and I accessed them through the COATS Web site.

Data Analysis

I transcribed each of the first-round interviews from the digital recordings and shared the transcripts with each participant in the second round of interviews to confirm accuracy and to allow them the opportunity to add, delete, or change any wording. Some participants made minor changes and a few additions, which I incorporated into the transcripts. I then reread the transcripts and listened to the recordings repeatedly to gain a sense of the voice of each participant. I spent three weeks in this reading and listening stage because I wanted to ensure that I listened intently to each participant's story and that I was immersed in the data (Wellington, 2000). I then wrote each participant's story to chronicle his or her experience in the awards process and to uncover the impact of that participation on individual teaching practice and collegial relationships within each of their PLCs.

I then coded the stories into various topics, which is a very effective way of grouping the participants' thoughts on similar topics into data clumps (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 133). As I conducted the interviews, read through my reflective journal, listened to the digital recordings of the interviews, transcribed the recordings, and wrote the participants' stories, I coded the data by using coloured pens to highlight different themes as they emerged. Initially, I identified 12 themes or threads of ideas, and after some grouping and refining, I reduced the 12 to 4 general themes. These themes are important because they crystallize the feelings of the participants about the awards process and give credence to those feelings as legitimate indicators of the consequences of participation in the awards process.

My analysis of the personal communications with the representative from Alberta Education gave me insight into the themes that the participants identified. The

contributions of this representative assisted me in devising my implications for practice and recommendations for further research, which are contained in the conclusion of this study.

Delimitations

One delimitation of this research study was the sample of three teachers and three principals. I chose to interview only three teacher finalists and their principals because of the in-depth nature of the questions. I wanted to delve at length into the experiences of only a few participants to gain a full picture of the impact of the awards process on both the individual and the school. This research was also delimited by time and travel constraints to participants in three schools in the same small urban setting.

Another delimitation was my choice of the definition of a PLC. This study is delimited to the Alberta context for the definition as it appears in the policy statement from Recommendation 13 of Alberta's Commission on Learning (Alberta Education, 2007c).

Limitations

The data that I collected for this study from individual interviews may have been limited by the participants' willingness to speak openly about their experiences in the awards process. Second, the findings of this study are based upon the experiences of three teachers and their principals and may not be transferable to all teachers. Third, this study is situated in the context of Alberta schools and the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and therefore may not be generalizable outside of Alberta.

Ethical Considerations

I began this research project by seeking approval to conduct the study from the Faculties of Education and Extension and the Augustana Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. Once I had received approval, I contacted the principals of each school in which I was hoping to conduct interviews to help them to understand the project and seek their participation. Only then did I contact the teacher finalists. Initially, I informed all six interview subjects about the nature of the study via phone and made no attempt at that time to obtain consent. The intent of the initial conversation was to provide information about the nature of the study, the extent of their participation, the purpose of the study, and their rights as participants. I then sent the letter of information to each of the participants (Appendix B) and waited to hear from each participant. Each participant replied positively, and I then set up an interview schedule. I informed all of the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or consequences and that their participation in this study was strictly voluntary, and I used no incentives to motivate their participation. I also informed the participants that I would use the data that I collected for this thesis research and any related academic papers. All participants signed a written consent form (Appendix C), no one withdrew from the study, and all participants were enthusiastic interview subjects.

Because I conducted this study in one small urban setting, I have not used the name of the city, school districts, schools, principals, or teachers; in all instances I have used pseudonyms. I have also not used any descriptions in the participants' stories that might reveal the identity of the city, school district, schools, principals, or teachers.

I transcribed the digital recordings myself, because I wanted not only to immerse myself in the data, but also to ensure the anonymity of the participants. I will secure the

data collected during this research project for five years, after which time I will destroy them.

Summary

In this chapter I presented the design and methodology of my study. I described the methods that I used to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings; explained the participant selection process and described the site schools; clarified the data sources, the data analysis process, the delimitations, and the limitations; and concluded with the measures that I took to meet ethical standards.

CHAPTER 4:

THREE AWARD STORIES

Chapter 4 contains the stories of three teachers who were nominated and selected as finalists in the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and the stories of the three principals of those teachers. The stories describe the experiences of each teacher and his or her principal through the nomination and selection process and include their insights into the awards system and its effect on both the teacher and the school culture. The teachers and principals shared their observations on the appropriateness of an awards process in the context of a PLC model. These stories address the impact of identifying teachers for awards on both teaching practice and collegial relationships. Also, these stories contain recommendations from the teachers and principals for improvements to the awards process.

Marie's Award Story

Marie

Marie was in her 18th year of teaching, all of which had been in a French immersion setting. She had been at her current school for 10 years, and she was teaching Grade 4. She was the learning facilitator for her school, which meant that she had some release time to work with other teachers in curriculum development and student support. Marie described her school as a single-track French immersion setting with approximately 350 students from kindergarten to Grade 6. Marie's school is in a small, prosperous city of 60,000 people in Alberta. Her school is an older building, built in the late 1960s, and is well maintained and clean.

When I entered the school to conduct the first interview, I found the atmosphere warm and inviting. The school secretary was welcoming and helpful. The principal had explained to her ahead of time my role in the school that day, and she was excited to show me around the school and took me to Marie's office. School was in session, and Marie talked to me during her coordinating release time. Everyone I encountered in the building seemed busy and happy. Three teachers in the staff room were engaged in a planning session for a year-end picnic. A congenial environment was evident to me as an outsider.

Marie began by telling me that she enjoyed working at her school and that she was proud to be a teacher there. In the school year previous to the June interview for this study, a parent of one of her Grade 4 students had nominated Marie for an Excellence in Teaching Award. Marie had also taught two older siblings from this student's family. This nomination was the third she had received during her teacher career, but this was the first time that she had been named a finalist.

After my introductory questions about Marie's background, I asked her to describe her understanding of the concept of a PLC and then explain to what degree she felt her school was a PLC. Marie affirmed that she had a clear understanding of the concept of a PLC and described it as "a group of teachers who work together as opposed to working individually to achieve the best as far as being educators and as far as the learning of children." Marie understood from her experience that any school staff has teachers who naturally work well together and those who choose to work individually. She saw the importance of a PLC model as encouraging and supporting the inclusion of all staff in collaborative work. She was pleased with the idea that Alberta schools were moving towards a PLC model because "we all come from different places, and some of

us are comfortable sharing, and some of us have to learn to share." She saw the PLC model as helping teachers to learn to share, and she was very excited about the Grades 4 learning team at her school. Marie felt that when the administration allowed for some release time for collaboration and made some scheduling adjustments two years ago, her colleagues really began to follow the PLC model, and she was part of a Grade 4 PLC:

> PLCs are a big part of our school here. I know in our Grade 4 program, we've gone to the extreme. We do everything together: We plan together, we team-teach, we do our special ed. planning together, and we are in the process of helping those that come before us and those that come after us to try the same idea.

Marie showed considerable pride and excitement in describing how her grade-alike colleagues worked together:

> We have regularly scheduled meetings; we have collaboration time every week. We have collaboration time several times a year where we get out of class to do collaborative planning, and it's a big part of our staff meetings every month.

However, she mentioned again that some colleagues were finding more of a challenge with the sharing process of the PLC model: "Becoming a PLC started out slowly in this school. I guess it starts out slowly at every school because people are not comfortable sharing and opening up." Marie stressed that one of the advantages of the PLC model is the colleagues' comfort in sharing their strong points and their needs, and she saw the awards system as fitting into the PLC model because teachers would already be comfortable with acknowledging each other's strengths and weaknesses:

> We used to worry that people are always being judgmental, and it's a whole different mindset to realize and to learn that it's okay to not be great at everything, and that there is usually other people around who can help you out. We are all great at something!

When I asked Marie how she felt about her nomination last year and her selection as a finalist, she said that she was thrilled and pleased about the recognition of her hard work. However, she voiced concern about the unevenness from school to school in the number of parents who were nominating teachers. Her sense of the lack of consistency of the implementation of the awards system within her district seemed to somewhat dampen her enjoyment of her own nomination:

> I would like to see it done in some fashion that all schools would have a chance to participate, because I know that in some schools it is not a priority and it is not pushed, but it is quite a push here with our parents. It could have something to do with where we are here in this educationally ambitious, prosperous city. I know that I taught in a small town before here, and I never got nominated, and I didn't do anything differently than I do here, so I think it's the culture.

Marie did not feel that her nomination and selection as a finalist had directly affected her teaching practice. She felt that she would be doing the same things next year that worked this year and trying new strategies in place of older ones. She indicated that, within her PLC of teaching colleagues, she was working on those new strategies and growing as a teacher. Her sense of team was evident throughout the interview in her repeated use of the word *we* when she described her teaching practice. Therefore, perhaps she attributed her professional growth more to her collegial relationships than to her award. Marie observed:

> I don't think my teaching practice has been affected by being recognized. I think it's just a matter of growing. I think we are growing here all the time. Things that work one year won't work the next year, and that's fine, too. Sometimes you have to go out of the box, and we're pretty far out of the box here.

When I asked Marie whether her nomination and selection had affected her collegial relationships, she reported that she had not noticed any impact. She was very confident that she had had positive interactions with her colleagues before her

nomination, and those interactions continued to be strong. She wrote letters of support for her colleagues when they were nominated previously, and she felt comfortable with those colleagues who wrote her letters of support for her three nominations:

> There was another teacher nominated when I was, and she did not get selected as a finalist. It was no problem because I wrote her letter of support and she wrote my letter. I don't think it bothered her at all; there was never a big deal, and there never would be.

Marie was very sure that the teaching profession should have ways to recognize the good work that teachers do, just as other professions recognize their strong performers. She felt that the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program was an appropriate way to celebrate and recognize teacher success. Marie said that, because teachers more often hear from the public and the government when things go wrong, the profession needs to have awards to balance that other kind of attention:

> I think quite often we don't hear from anyone unless it is a problem, and we certainly don't hear from the provincial government, or even our school board, telling us we are doing a good job. So we'd better tell each other we are doing a good job.

In response to my question about possible shortcomings in the awards program, Marie repeated her concern about the inconsistency in the level of recognition from school to school, and even from classroom to classroom:

> I see lots of people, some right here in this school, who should have received recognition the way I have. So I can't say the awards program is great, and I can't say it is terrible. But I definitely think there has to be more people being recognized, but you have to have the parents to do it.

She speculated that parents from more upper-class communities are more likely to take the time and have the skills to complete the nomination package: "I really think it's a

middle-class, upper-class kind of thing. It requires a lot of work. When I looked and saw what those parents had to do, it wasn't a five-minute process."

Second, Marie was concerned about the process used to notify nominees who had been selected as finalists. In her case, she found out by reading her name in the daily newspaper. Third, in this last nomination she never saw the letters that a parent, her colleague, and her principal had written about her, and yet, in a previous nomination with a former principal, she had received a copy of all three letters of support, which she said inspired and encouraged her. She thought that there could be more consistency in how the nomination packages are handled.

Pierre, Marie's Principal

When I interviewed Pierre, Marie's principal, who supported her nomination, he was very enthusiastic about his school and proud to be its principal. He had been a principal for 15 years, 4 of them at his current school, which he described as "quite an ordinary or normal elementary school for our community, which is a small city of about 60,000 people." Pierre was very eager to talk about the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and immediately made himself available when I phoned to make an appointment for the first interview. He appeared to have reflected considerably on the awards system before our first interview, and he was unrushed and thoughtful in his responses during the interview.

When I asked Pierre about his understanding of the concept of a PLC, he focused his response on the aspects of teacher autonomy and teachers' use of data to plan collaboratively for improved student learning. He said that a PLC of teachers has a long-term view of student learning and plans for the future, not just for short-term gains. He indicated that the role of the administration in a PLC is to encourage teachers with similar

assignments to collaborate and schedule time for those teachers to work together. He also talked about teachers' use of their planning time to discuss teaching strategies and interventions for particular students at risk.

In describing his school in terms of a PLC, Pierre focused first on the administrative scheduling practices to allow for collaborative planning time:

> We have some full-day-Friday professional development days, and so that gives us some opportunities for discussion, data analysis, and then collaboration. We have tried, where possible, to take grade-level partners and combine preps and use that time to collaborate weekly. And it is the hope that through that time they talk about their students, they talk about their teaching, and they try to see how they can better help the students.

Second, Pierre talked about the differences among staff members in terms of their commitment to and comfort with participating in the PLC model. He saw on his staff varying levels of teacher participation, which often depended on the individual's background and teaching style: "The way that a person sees themselves as a part of a professional learning community is also contingent on their own professional background, their experience, their own training, perhaps how many years of teaching they have under their belts."

In terms of the awards program within the context of a PLC, Pierre made an interesting comment on the varying teaching styles. He said that teachers who are good at sharing the stage and celebrating the talents of others make a good fit within the PLC model: "There are some people who have greater talent at recognizing each other's strengths and trying to learn from each other's strengths. Those people do very well in a learning community." Although Pierre saw his school as a PLC, he was aware of the inconsistency in the level of teacher participation and seemed committed to moving toward more consistency:

> And so it is never something that is consistent across grade levels. And so do we have it? I would say that we do. Are we where we could be? I would say there is always progress that can be made to be a better learning community.

Pierre shared a number of interesting examples when I questioned him about the fit of an awards program in a PLC. His first example was his own recent personal experience as a principal of being nominated for an award. He felt very humbled and unworthy of the recognition, and he thought the nomination prompted him to work harder at being a good leader:

> I think that when that nomination happened, I did become more a part of the professional learning community because now I was more ready to lead, more ready to listen; I was more ready to participate in professional development activities.

His second example highlights the inconsistency among staff members in terms of their level of commitment to the collaborative nature of a PLC. He speculated about a teacher who he felt became more independent and less collaborative when she was nominated for an award. He described her before her nomination as traditional and somewhat elitist in the staff with whom she chose to work—often only experienced, veteran teachers. Following the nomination, he felt that she became more entrenched in her elitist approach to teamwork:

> To receive the nomination, I found, gave her a false sense of authority. Over the years, however, she may follow the same path I did and be more ready to listen, but I saw her exert some inappropriate authority after her nomination during a situation we had at the school.

Pierre saw this teacher as indicative of the nature of any model for teaching practice in that the model is very dependent on the individuals who are participating, and he saw that as applying to both the PLC model and the awards program.

Pierre's third example speaks to another kind of inconsistency—the difference in teachers' responses to being nominated. He described a teacher who had been nominated three times. When a parent approached Pierre for the third nomination for this teacher, he was concerned that she would not want to be nominated a third time. However, when he informed her of the nomination, her response was very favourable: "When I mentioned to her that some parents wanted to nominate her, she beamed; she lit up. She was so pleased, as if it were the first time she had been nominated." He then described another teacher who was very shy and, when she was approached to be nominated, did not feel comfortable being put on display and turned down the nomination. He explained the difference:

> Two personalities, one for whom the recognition is almost like that little boost of energy, an extra battery to keep her going and to say, "Yeah, what she's doing to make a difference in the lives of students is important"; another one who is embarrassed by the recognition.

Pierre finished his answer to my question about the awards program's fitting into a PLC with a positive conclusion. He stated that the recognition that teachers receive seems to help them to give themselves permission to try new things in their teaching practice. He saw the nomination as reassurance that they are doing the right thing, which provides a solid foundation upon which they can build in new strategies. Pierre also reported that the colleagues of the nominated teachers feel that innovation is celebrated and that they will be more ready to try new things as well:

> When people realize that certain individuals are being innovative and that they are being rewarded for being innovative, it does give a little more hope for other people to take risks. To see people being recognized helps them take the risk, which is part of the PLC. Without risk, you don't have a PLC, in my mind.

In response to my question about how the administration advertises the program in his school, Pierre told me that he uses a low-key distribution of the awards information to the parent community. As a principal, he does not initiate nominations, but he is very supportive of and grateful to parents who initiate the process. He mentioned that one year he forgot to put the awards notice in the newsletter, and a number of parents approached him about the omission because it is very much a part of the school culture.

In response to my question on the communication to staff about which teachers the awards process is recognizing, Pierre said that this information fits into his ongoing school practice of recognizing good work. He believes that part of the PLC model involves celebrating the good work of staff members: "We believe in recognition. Sometimes there will be a little gift certificate or something for a teacher." He spoke at length about the fact that the awards program has three levels of recognition—being nominated, being selected as a finalist, and being declared a recipient. He has had teachers at all three levels during his term as principal at his school, and he works hard at honouring the teachers at all three levels. Pierre discussed the significance of the letter-writing abilities of the supporters, especially the parents:

> We had three nominations, and two of them became finalists. It's not that the person getting the finalist is necessarily head and shoulders above the person getting the nomination. As a matter of fact, I found that the person who did not make the finalist this year was probably the most worthy of the three for being a finalist. That's what leads me to believe that it's also how we write the letter of support and dependent on the talent and the craft of the parent who does the nomination. I wrote a letter of support in all three cases so I don't know that it is my talent that made a difference, so I have to say it is probably the parent and the colleague support. Depending upon how well they craft their letter might sway the jury to deciding the finalist. And I would hate to have a person think that they are any lesser because they didn't make it to the finalist round. Again, the idea of being recognized is probably the key ingredient in this process, versus where you actually make it. Now, the twenty award winners I believe to be very, very worthy of that. Usually, to me, the third step when they actually make it to the banquet

level and they are recognized as a winner, they tend to be the people that are truly the innovators in our teaching profession. I think that's a more important and significant step.

However, I don't think it diminishes those who don't make it to that level. Maybe it's because we don't draw attention to it. I don't sense it when we point out that out of the thousands of teachers in the province, to be in that category of the 300 that were nominated is an achievement. Then if you're within the 120 that made it to the finalist we point it out, we say it, but I don't know that people feel less worthy.

It was very clear that, although Pierre has supported the awards process, he was concerned about the potential for not recognizing some excellent teachers and for discouraging teachers who are nominated but are not selected as finalists or winners. He concluded his conversation with me by stating that he supports the awards program in its current form and does not feel that it is necessary to expand the program in an attempt to address his concerns: "You know, I'm fine with the process as it is right now. I don't know how we could change it without more money, and I don't think we need to invest more money there."

Robin's Award Story

Robin

Robin had been a high school science teacher for 25 years, all at the same high school in the same small city of 60,000 in which Marie's school was located. A parent of a student in one of her classes at the time had nominated Robin two years before our conversations, and she had taught the parent's two older children. At the time of the nomination, she was the Science Department head; and at the time of our conversations, she had been appointed assistant principal. She proudly described her high school as a dual-track French immersion and English program school with an Advanced Placement Program, an extensive option offering, a very student-centered approach to teaching, and

a student population of about 1,000. Robin's school was a clean, well-maintained building constructed in the early 1970s. The staff room was a busy place the day I visited. It was year-end examination week, and many teachers were gathered in the staff room between supervision responsibilities. I could hear positive conversations about this year's accomplishments and next year's teaching assignments and plans.

To Robin, a PLC is a group of teachers who are committed to the same vision and who are working collaboratively rather than cooperatively. She emphasized the difference between collaboration and cooperation:

> That has proven to be a very difficult concept to get across to staff members—the difference between collaboration on student learning issues versus cooperation in making up units and exams. That for me is the essence of it: How are you going to concentrate specifically on learning without merely cooperating on developing materials and unit plans, even though all that stuff is also important?

Robin described her high school staff as a group of people who worked hard to become a PLC, having dedicated the last five years to that goal. Each department has collaborative time imbedded into the timetable, and each staff meeting agenda has a time set aside for professional collaboration. For one assistant principal, teacher collaboration is an area of responsibility; and for another, student learning. "We now operate in this school with the philosophy that most student behavioural issues dissipate or disappear if the student is learning. That is part of the professional learning community concept."

Another move toward the PLC concept at Robin's school involves redefining the role of department heads. The principal has hired clerical support to free department heads from paperwork to allow them to spend more time in classrooms with teachers: "We're moving from the old department-head style of doing book orders and managerial, clerical tasks. The department heads are going to become more involved as the curricular

experts." Robin was very excited about this redefinition because she hoped that it would reduce the isolation of teachers and encourage colleagues to work together on learning issues. As a classroom teacher, she remembered feeling alone when a student misbehaved or struggled with learning; she knew that receiving emotional support from others is educationally productive. "And so what we are trying to do is to get rid of some of that loneliness, to get department heads into classrooms with teachers, the focus being on student learning."

Robin saw the awards program as a good fit for a PLC because part of the award process involves teacher colleagues' writing letters of support. She felt that this encourages colleagues to observe the classrooms of nominated teachers to gather material for their letters of support. This was in keeping with Robin's concept of PLCs as reducing teacher isolation. She felt that the awards program is an appropriate process for recognizing strong teaching practice within the PLC model: "It is very affirming to teachers who go into the classroom day after day after day by themselves and work really, really hard and truly care about kids."

In response to my question on the effect of the award on her teaching practice, Robin felt that the award gave her personal strength and affirmation, but that her school's move toward a PLC model had a greater impact on her teaching practice than did the award. She explained her experience:

> I don't know that my teaching practices have changed that much. It was very honouring to be nominated. I am still teaching, but this PLC journey that we're on has coalesced a lot of my thoughts regarding student learning and how to be in classrooms as a teacher. That has changed me more than the Excellence in Teaching Award, but that award gave me great strength that year.

In terms of the impact of the award on her collegial relationships, Robin saw her colleagues as genuinely happy for her and supportive of the recognition that she had received. She did not feel sense any negative feelings, and she mentioned that in previous years with other teacher nominations, she had not been aware of any jealousy or hard feelings. She felt that, again, the PLC model of teachers' recognizing and celebrating each other's work fits well into an awards process that does the same. She said that, since the adoption of the PLC model, the staff set time aside at meetings regularly to tell stories of teachers' success, and therefore the announcements about award nominations fit well into that sharing time:

> I felt that people in this school were truly, truly happy for those of us who were recognized as finalists. I think part of that is that we all recognize that we got there by support and working with other people who were maybe not recognized but who were equally deserving. I really believe that, working in isolation, we would not be able to do such a good job in the classroom as we can working with a team approach. The PLC model certainly emphasizes that.

Robin expressed concern about the element of chance in the awards program in terms of recognizing the good work that teachers do and about the unevenness of some excellent teachers' being nominated and other excellent teachers' not being nominated:

> I don't know how fair it is in terms of actually selecting all the deserving people, because I suppose it's chance that you have a parent who cares that much to actually go through the process and nominate you, because to nominate somebody takes considerable work and effort on the nominator's part.

Robin felt that there were other more deserving people on staff who had not been nominated, and she felt lucky that she had a parent of one of her students who knew about the awards program and was prepared to go through the nomination process. At this point she again emphasized the importance of a school's having many other ways to

celebrate teacher effort and success: "There are all kinds of ways that things are celebrated in this building, fabulous things that people do."

Robin concluded her interview with the observation that the Alberta awards program should continue in its current form and that school administrators should ensure that the nomination process is accessible and doable for parents. Her closing words were as follows:

> If a parent is motivated to nominate somebody, we need to make that nomination process as easy as possible. I am saying that now as an administrator, thinking that part of my role here now is to create a culture of support among staff, honouring your staff, and celebrating the wonderful things that they do.

I could certainly sense from Robin's candid responses that she saw the need for a balance between creating a sense of teamwork while, at the same time, honouring individual excellence.

Charles, Robin's Principal

Charles was the assistant principal at Robin's school at the time of her nomination and was appointed principal shortly afterwards. He had been at this school for six years, two years as a teacher, two years as an assistant principal, and two years as the principal. He had been the lead teacher and then the lead administrator in the school for its AISI project on implementing the PLC model. Charles was very enthusiastic about the topic of my research, and he warned me, jokingly, that he could talk forever about the PLC concept and the awards program.

Charles viewed his school as very far along in the implementation cycle of changing the school into a PLC. He described the PLC model as focused on four important questions: What do students need to know? How do we know when they know it? How do we respond when they don't know? and What are we going to do when they

perform what we wanted them to know before we start? He also emphasized the necessity of collaboration among staff members in the PLC model, which is saw as built on trust and a much deeper activity than cooperation. He reported that at his school the goal of the PLC model is for teachers to build a sense of trust to the extent that they bring not only strengths to the planning sessions (as they would do in a cooperative model), but also a sense of vulnerability and an understanding of each other. He described his views of the model:

> You share common goals, but the goals are not only the product; they are process. But most important, everyone at the table realizes that each person is responsible. Collaboration involves reaching a different level of mutual respect, of sharing our learnings, of appreciating each other.

He was very proud of the degree to which his staff understood the PLC concept and was working towards its implementation. He felt that his teachers had a high level of knowledge about the PLC model and proudly stated, "I think our teachers are also in the true sense of the word developing a collaborative process."

Charles saw a fit between the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and the PLC model: "My experience with the Excellence in Teaching nominees is that they probably are teachers who are a learning community. They view education as a community of learners working together." He felt that the criteria that the awards program uses are very similar to the descriptors of teaching practices in a PLC and described the similarity:

> Teachers in the PLC model engage in the collaborative process because they are so eager to; they naturally want to in order to improve their teaching practice. They enter into things in a different way. They always do much more than cooperate. They always bring to the table their understanding and respect for others. It's those characteristics that get them nominated for the award. You and I working together 20 years ago would have identified the same teachers. I suppose with the language inherent in the PLC movement, it gives us a language that says

> "Aha! That's why they're so good!" You know, now we can talk about them because we understand them better, and we find that they are very representative of members of a community of learners that engage in the collaborative process.

Charles suggested that the PLC model tends to bring out the best in teachers. During our conversation he began to verbalize his realization that the PLC model was a good context for the awards program in Alberta:

> It's hard for me to put it in the context of a PLC. Is it any different in the environment that went before? I think now that I talk about it with you, it becomes different to me. Yes, I imagine PLC stuff brings out the excellence, kind of amplifies what was already there.

Charles made some further observations on the connection between the PLC model and the awards process in terms of the deprivatization of classroom teaching. He stated that the PLC model makes more intentional the intuition we used to have about what good practice looks like. This fits with an awards program that is also very intentional about good teaching. He described the intentionality of the PLC model:

> All we do now in a PLC is, we talk about the criteria more, we spend a lot more time demanding improved teacher practice, we really do far more talking about the learning or the lack thereof, and so it's more public. It's not a private story any more.

Charles appeared very excited about comparing the opening up of classroom practice in the PLC model and the sharing of teacher practice that happens in the award process, and he made the following connection between the PLC model and the awards program:

> By the very nature of making it more public, we invite more consideration of the criteria of awards like this. I suppose the whole model has created more sharing. We are hoping to make the classroom a more public place, and that has to do with getting rid of the aloneness.

Charles also highlighted the connection between the PLC model and the awards program in terms of allowing teachers the freedom and comfort to take chances with innovation.

He saw the affirmation that comes with being nominated for an award as giving teachers the strength to try new teaching practices, and he connected that to the philosophy of trying new ways to reach learners that is imbedded in the PLC model: "If you are affirmed, it lets you breathe a little more; it lets you relax and be who you are without thinking about pushing the limits. This is very much a part of the PLC culture."

Charles charged that the local nomination process fosters cynicism among non-nominees because some excellent teachers have never been nominated. He thought that in some schools this could be the result of principals' choosing not to become involved in the awards process: "Sadly, at the local level, some principals do and other principals, I think out of laziness or disrespect, don't get involved in the process." He stressed that it is the responsibility of principals to identify teachers who are worthy of recognition and find ways to celebrate their practice. On occasion, he has encouraged a parent to consider nominating a particularly worthy teacher.

In terms of the awards process within his school, Charles reported that the school newsletter informs the school community about the awards program. His school supports the program because it recognizes people and fits into the school's recognition process. Once a teacher has been nominated, Charles announces it during the Celebrations section of the staff meeting agenda and then circulates the information to the community. He described the process:

> We put it in the school monthly newsletter and it's on our Web site, and we notify the local paper. In the end, my personal sense is that we do that to market the school. It has nothing to do with excellence in the classroom or with celebrating the person's success. The staff meeting in front of colleagues is the significant place.

Charles concluded his interview by stating that he perceives the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program as completely appropriate and that, despite the concerns about inconsistencies, the province should continue with the program:

> A hundred percent appropriate to me. In fact, I don't think we have enough vehicles that are reasonably fair to recognize masters in our profession. I think we are very fearful of the inequities in the selection process. Our fear in all sorts of ways has held us back from many, many wonderful things. The award is totally appropriate, and there should be more of them.

My sense at the conclusion of this interview was that Charles was perhaps even more motivated than he had been before the interview to share information about the awards program with his school community. As he reflected during the interview process, he solidified for himself the value of the awards program within his school.

Josh's Award Story

Josh

Josh had been an elementary teacher for four years, all at the same school, located in the same city as both Marie's and Charles' schools. Josh had been teaching the same grade level for those four years, but clearly considered himself a newcomer to the profession. He made repeated references to being an inexperienced teacher and to being grateful for the support of the veteran teachers. His elementary school had a population of 350 students from kindergarten to Grade 6 and three Learning Assisted classrooms. The school was built in the early 1980s and is attractive, well-kept, and extensively decorated with student work and curricular material. It has a large, newly built playground that an active parent community funded and constructed. I met with Josh one hour before school started, and when I arrived, the school was busy with many staff members who were already in their classrooms getting ready for the day or visiting in the staff room.

Everyone I encountered was welcoming and friendly, eager to show me around the building and help me find Josh's classroom.

Of the three teachers I interviewed, Josh shared the least about the formal characteristics of a PLC model, but he discussed at length his experiences with collaboration among staff members at his school. He was very clear about the collaborative aspect of the PLC model, and he was eager to describe the collaborative nature of his work with grade-alike colleagues. He also attributed his nomination for the award to the support he received from this sharing: "My understanding of a PLC is teachers collaborating together to improve student learning, to share ideas, thoughts, and plans. I found this very, very helpful. I think it is the majority of the reason this nomination came about."

He described his school as demonstrating many characteristics of a PLC, with various degrees of collaboration among staff members: "It is a very collaborative type school, for the most part. There are always a few who keep to themselves, but most of us bounce ideas, concerns, and plans off one another." He talked about both the informal and the formal collaboration that was taking place among staff members and very much valued the informal sharing time with colleagues before and after school: "It is informal like friends talking, sharing what worked and what didn't. I'll learn from others just by talking." As for the more formal collaboration, he referred to the school's AISI project, which was a three-year focus on assessment for learning in the area of student writing. The project provided the school with funding to create release time for teachers to plan together. The lead teacher for this project used a PLC model of scheduling grade-alike teacher preparation time together to allow for professional development activities and planning sessions: "We do have our professional time that we collaborate with the AISI

project. We get subs in, and we do lunch meetings. Our AISI work demonstrates some characteristics of a PLC model."

When I asked how he felt about being nominated, Josh again emphasized his status as a new teacher. He was thrilled, but, as a beginner, he felt somewhat unworthy: "In a way I felt almost embarrassed because I am a rookie teacher, and there is so much I don't know. I know I'm not the best teacher, but I'm working on it." During the interview Josh made numerous references to being recently married and having a six-month-old baby. His wife attended the district ceremony at which Josh received his plaque. It was important to him that his wife share in the excitement of this award, and he saw the award as a way of bringing his wife into the world of his classroom:

> I heard about being a finalist through a letter. It was very exciting. My wife and I looked at the number of names published later in the paper, and we felt it was a neat honour to get that far.

Josh's humility as a new teacher was also evident when I asked him to tell me about the impact of the award on his teaching practice. He indicated that he often doubted his teaching practice and felt somewhat insecure about what he was doing in his classroom, but that working closely with his grade-alike partners helped him to feel more comfortable in the classroom. He attributed the increase in his comfort level to the PLC concept, but he more directly attributed the increase in his confidence level to being nominated and selected as a finalist in the awards program. He also linked the award to his newfound willingness to try new things and take more risks with his teaching practice: "I think maybe I'm a little less worried that I'm not doing the right thing. And you can let your creativity flow as long as you are sticking to the basics as well."

In terms of collegial relationships, Josh felt that his fellow staff members were very happy for him and did not sense any resentment when he was nominated. In fact, he said that his grade-alike teachers seemed to take pride in his recognition as a reflection of their support for him. He compared this to what had happened this current year when one of his colleagues was nominated and he felt proud because he had worked closely with that teacher: "Even Brian being nominated this year, you take a tiny chunk of that as your own because we work together." He went on to speculate that teachers in a PLC model work so closely together that they take pride in each other's accomplishments and celebrate each other's successes: "Brian and Joan have been nominated this year, and everyone is happy for them, too."

When I questioned Josh about the appropriateness of an awards system in a PLC model, he considered it very fitting to formalize the recognition that is already embedded in the model: "It's very good to have an awards program. It's formalized, which is good; it gives it validity." He said that for experienced, talented teachers, the awards program serves a very necessary function of celebrating excellence. Josh then emphasized at this point the idea that the nomination was also a way for the parents of a student to thank a teacher for what that teacher has done for their child. He saw this as a separate function for the award, and he seemed to think that it was the reason that he as a new teacher was nominated. He was very grateful for this type of parental support.

John, Josh's Principal

John had been the principal of his elementary school for five years, assistant principal for two years, and an elementary teacher for four years before becoming an administrator. He described his school as a site with both regular and three special-needs classrooms that are integrated very effectively into the school community. He shared with

me that he had been selected as a finalist during his teaching time and that he was very interested in the role of teacher awards in the culture of a school. During his five years as a principal at his school, parents had nominated teachers for an Excellence in Teaching Award every year.

We began the interview with John's description of his understanding of the PLC concept. To him, the most important aspect of a PLC is teachers' working together, supporting a wide range of learners: "It is a collaborative model in terms of supporting student learning and accommodating student needs. Classroom instruction would be grounded in a very collaborative and supportive model, with lots of planning among teachers. A very child-centered education."

John described his school as demonstrating many of the characteristics of a PLC. He saw each grade level as having a PLC of those teachers. He was particularly proud of the support that new teachers receive within those grade-alike groupings. John listed many collaborative activities:

> At this school, professional learning communities would include mentorship for beginning teachers, planning activities at the grade levels, cross-age partnerships with other grade levels, extracurricular activities to bring grades and classes together, and the coordination of community services for individual students or classrooms of students.

John emphasized the importance of the school administration's scheduling preparation time for teachers to work together. He used as an example the Balanced Literacy AISI project at his school in which teachers visited each other's classrooms, which he felt illustrated the deprivatization of classrooms in the PLC model:

> I think that was one of the very positive things of the AISI project: the opportunity for teachers who were implementing Balanced Literacy to have preparation time together to plan. Also, the teachers watched each other teach and learned from each other.

He then referred to the school's new AISI project on assessment for learning in the area of student writing as another demonstration of the school's implementation of the PLC model:

> In the area of assessment for learning, we've had grade levels get together regularly to look at writing, to consider how they would evaluate it and what it tells them going forward. We've been doing lunch-hour meetings and separate PD activities. I would think this collaboration fits under the description of a professional learning community.

John asserted that the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program fits into the PLC model if the awards process is handled the way it is at his school. He pointed out that at his school the administration celebrates teacher successes in many ways already, so that this particular award is just added to the many opportunities to tell teachers what a great job they are doing. They also emphasize that the nomination demonstrates an individual parent's gratefulness to an individual teacher:

> I think it's just more of a way for a parent or family to say thank you to a teacher who has made a difference in their child's life. That's how I see it—and not necessarily competitive. If it was framed in a competitive way, I could see how it would not fit in a PLC.

John was aware that along with the parent-driven nomination process comes the reality that some worthy teacher recipients go unnoticed. At times he was motivated to suggest to a parent the possibility of nominating a particular teacher: "Have we planted a seed in a particular place sometimes? Yes." John saw this as part of the role of a PLC leader to acknowledge and celebrate teacher success. On the other hand, to be sensitive to teachers who are not nominated, John said that the school recognizes nominated teachers at a very modest level. In keeping with the sense of community in a PLC model, the

recognition is most significant at the first level of the nomination, and then less is done for teachers who are selected as finalists or provincial recipients. He clarified the balance:

> It comes back to, we do so much together that we don't want to overemphasize the success of one person. I think we make the bigger deal of the nomination level within the district because that's what we feel is important. Beyond that, it's just people sitting in a committee room reviewing pieces of paper.

John also described the awards program as an appropriate way for the teaching profession to demonstrate to the public the scope of the work that teachers are doing. He said that, although students are aware of that good work, the rest of the community would remain uninformed about it if not for awards programs. He described the communication role of the awards program:

> I think it reminds the greater community about some of the things that we do for kids. At the school board presentation to our award winner, one parent who had listened to the description of the teacher's work said to me, "Wow! I didn't realize!" That brings recognition to the profession and puts a positive spin on things instead of always the complaining.

John concluded with his assertion that the awards experience at his school, in his view, has always been positive. He expressed appreciation as an administrator for the outside recognition of teachers, which he felt supplements the praise that he can offer at the school level, and he expressed his gratitude for the awards system:

> As an administrator in a school, you can provide feedback to teachers that says, "You're doing a great job," but to receive it from an outside source and have someone review what you do, I think, really says, "Okay, I am doing a good job." It provides so much in terms of validation.

John felt that it is validating for teachers to receive recognition from a source beyond the school, perhaps because teachers for some reason consider administrators obligated to offer praise, whereas parents do so without obligation.

Summary

In my meetings with the three award finalists and their principals, one feature common to all participants surfaced: their appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their experiences and reflect upon the process. The three teachers and their principals reported that they had not previously talked openly about their involvement with the awards system, and they welcomed the chance to tell their stories. As my conversations with the teachers and principals proceeded, they began to talk about ideas that perhaps they had thought about before but had not verbalized. It was interesting to see their energy levels rise as they became excited about the topic and shared more and more thoughts. It was significant to me that they consistently supported the awards program, but always with some hesitation. As the participants shared their stories, they became aware at times of the almost contradictory nature of some of their responses. They began to realize that the awards program has both positive and negative aspects, and, generally, they accepted that reality. The four themes that I have identified address this incongruent nature of their thoughts on an awards program in the context of a PLC. The first three, which address the positive aspects, are as follows: recognition of teacher success within a PLC, teacher recognition and risk taking, and teacher recognition and deprivatization; the fourth theme, which addresses the negative concern, is individual versus collective accomplishments.

CHAPTER 5:

THEMES IN RELATION TO LITERATURE

The themes that emerged from the three awards stories have many similarities to the findings in the literature. Many of the characteristics and the processes in place in the operation of a school as a PLC that the literature described can be seen in the day-to-day operations of the Alberta schools in this study. Although the experiences of the three teachers and their principals who were involved in the awards process varied, four themes that the literature supported emerged with regard to fitting an awards process into a PLC model: recognition of teacher success within a PLC, teacher recognition and risk taking, teacher recognition and deprivatization, and individual versus collective culture. In this chapter I will discuss these four themes and compare them to the findings in the literature.

Recognition of Teacher Success Within a Professional Learning Community

While I listened to the participants in this study talk about their experiences with the teacher awards program in Alberta, it became clear to me that they believed that it was important for the school community to recognize and celebrate teacher success. In my review of the literature I found support for the concept that recognition and celebration of teacher success are important parts of a PLC. Kruse and Louis's (1997) work on the design of the work setting in a school that operates as a PLC reinforced the idea that school leaders must create a supportive work environment for teachers. Although they discussed the need for structural supports such as meeting times and physical proximity, Kruse and Louis focused their discussion on the social supports that

recognize teacher efforts. I see the awards program in Alberta as part of the social support system necessary in the PLC to which Kruse and Louis referred: "We suggest that as teachers and administrators become better able to create environments that are supportive of their own learning they can, in turn, become more supportive of their students' emotional and learning needs" (p. 10). These authors extended this concept of supporting the emotional needs of teachers through recognizing their efforts by expanding their discussions to include the idea that recognizing individual teacher success increases the possibility of creating group success. They explained that when school administrators in a PLC create the supports to encourage and recognize the strengths of a particular teacher, they are contributing to the potential for other members of the community to improve their practice:

> Thus, as individuals succeed, the communal group succeeds. Individual success is necessarily linked to communal success. When individuals learn new ways of practice and thinking they can contribute to the group process in ways that are supportive of the shared goals of the school organization. By creating a system in which the growth of one teacher benefits all teachers and students through extended focus on improved practice and student learning, teachers can learn to utilize their reflective skills for the benefit of the communal goals. (p. 11)

This concept of focusing on improved practice and celebrating the successes of teachers emerged in the stories of all three finalists when they talked about the significance of sharing the awards news at staff meetings. Charles, Robin's principal, reported that the staff uses a portion of each staff meeting to tell success stories and celebrate the efforts of teachers: "Every staff meeting we have a period of time we call *celebrations*, and I would bring these kinds of successes or the nominations or the awards into that arena. The staff meeting in front of their colleagues is the significant place." The teacher finalists understood the importance of sharing this good news to develop respect among

colleagues and, eventually, parents as they learn about the awards through school newsletters. Again, Kruse and Louis (1997) sustained this idea in their discussion on the need for staff members in a PLC to respect each other and to be respected by the school community: "Trust and respect from colleagues inside the school and key members of relevant external communities, such as parents and the district office staff, are necessary conditions for developing commitment to school goals" (p. 10).

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) carried the theme of recognition at staff meetings further and stressed the importance of school leaders' affirmation of individual performance to foster collective efficacy:

> The school leader accomplishes this by executing the responsibility of affirmation—recognizing and celebrating the legitimate successes of individuals within the school and the school as a whole. Such acknowledgement provides evidence to the faculty that their efforts are producing tangible results. To do this, the principal might devote a portion of each faculty meeting to acknowledging accomplishments of the school and individuals working toward the common good of enhanced student achievement. (p. 101)

Gullatt and Bennett (1995) also emphasized the importance of principals' taking every possible opportunity to commend teachers, including recognizing good work in staff meetings: "Principals should regularly schedule times to recognize teachers, such as at the beginning or end of a faculty meeting, on the intercom at week's end, or during a student assembly" (p. 1).

Mason (2003) conducted further research on the need for incentives and supports for teachers in a PLC. She focused her work on the need for teachers in a PLC to have data to learn about and improve student learning, but she also acknowledged the need for teachers to receive acknowledgement for their efforts and successes:

> Both incentives and supports play a role in perpetuating the team's interest in learning from data and using data to support school-wide change and improvement. . . . This active support and recognition of hard work and progress on the part of the administration became a type of incentive for the team to learn and grow. (p. 23)

These findings affirm the observation of Pierre, Marie's principal, about supporting the efforts of teachers through recognition at staff meetings:

> Typically, we will recognize in our staff meetings the people who have been nominated. We believe in recognition. Sometimes there will be a little gift certificate or something for that teacher. They usually give so much of themselves anyway, it is the least the school can do to give them a little voucher for a restaurant.

The descriptions of the participants in my study of the acknowledgement of their awards at their staff meetings is reflected in the work of Kouzes and Posner (2003) in the area of leaders' recognition of individual effort and achievement: "Today's leaders are discovering that encouraging the heart through public events builds trust and strengthens relationships in the workplace" (p. 28). Robin commented, "We were honoured at staff meetings, and they described our contributions to the school, which was very nice." Kouzes and Posner identified three important functions of this public honouring, all of which serve the goals of a PLC. First, the announcements at a staff meeting remind staff of the school's mission and vision, which these teachers are serving so well. "By lifting the spirits of people in this way, we heighten awareness of organizations' expectations and humanize the values and standards such that we motivate at a deep and enduring level" (p. 28). Second, the public recognition of a teacher's accomplishments at staff meetings encourages everyone, including the award recipient, to reach for a high standard and to learn from the best. Pierre said, "There are some people who have greater talent at recognizing each other's strengths and trying to learn from each other's strengths. Those

people do very well in a learning community." When he spoke of his own personal experience as an award recipient, Pierre indicated that he was motivated to try harder and do more to live up to the selection criteria: "If people see me as being a leader in the teaching profession, I'd better start living up to it, and I actually started to work harder at learning how to become a better teacher." Third, Kouzes and Posner found that publicly sharing individual accomplishments brings staff members closer together: "Social support is absolutely essential to our well-being and to our productivity. Celebrating together is one way we can get this essential support" (p. 28).

DuFour and Eaker (1998), in their work on schools as PLCs, acknowledged the need to recognize the work of individual teachers: "Public recognition of individuals is likely to have a positive effect on those who receive it" (p. 142). That recognition also motivates the recipient's colleagues: "Recognition of individuals and teams provides the remaining staff members with examples and models that motivate them to engage in similar behavior" (p. 143). Consistent with Kouzes and Posner (2003), who concurred that recognition reinforces the values of the organization, DuFour and Eaker stated, "Calling attention to the presence of behaviors that are consistent with the values of the school and highlighting the positive results that are produced by those behaviors reinforces the improvement initiative" (p. 143).

In his work on transformational work in schools, Sparks (2005) offered additional affirmation of the need for teacher recognition in a PLC. He wrote confidently about the need for leaders to recognize the work of exemplar teachers within their schools to motivate and inspire their colleagues:

> "Positive deviants," Jerry Sternin told me in a Winter 2004 JSD interview, "are people whose behavior and practices produce solutions to problems that others in the group who have access to exactly the same resources have not been able to solve. We want to identify these people because they provide demonstrable evidence that solutions to the problem already exist within the community. (p. 110)

Sparks saw the transformational work of school leaders as grounded in their ability to recognize and celebrate the excellent work of individuals: "Schools that systematically identify, deeply appreciate, and spread the outstanding practices that already exist within them will also be more effective in using external sources of knowledge" (p. 112).

In concluding the theme of recognition and celebration of teacher effort and success, I refer to Eliot Eisner (1998), who discussed the taken-for-granted in education. Eisner believed that the status quo in education assumes that teachers do not need public recognition and that celebration is unnecessary in schooling. However, educators take for granted that those who work in education need to be serious and do not need celebrations. Eisner disputed this status quo and challenged educators to reclaim the spirit and joy in education through celebrations: "Celebration has a spirit that is rare in discussions of American schooling. Celebration connotes joy, ceremony, something special in experience. Celebrations are events we look forward to, occasions we prize" (p. 21). An awards program can increase the number of opportunities to celebrate success during the school year.

Teacher Recognition and Risk Taking

A second theme that emerged in my interviews with the teacher recipients and their principals was that teachers are more apt to try new strategies and challenge themselves to reach a higher standard by taking risks if their efforts are recognized and rewarded. When I asked how his teaching practice had been impacted, Josh indicated that

he felt more relaxed as a teacher and was more willing to take chances with different teaching techniques: "I think maybe I am a little less worried that I'm not doing the right thing. And you can let your creativity flow as long as you are sticking to the basics." The literature also identified this theme of recognition encouraging risk taking.

I will begin this discussion of the literature on the theme of teachers' taking risks with a reference to the work of Fullan (2001) on educational change in learning communities. Fullan clearly stated in his discussion of the teacher's role in significant school reform that teachers are more apt to reflect upon and change their teaching practice if colleagues acknowledge and applaud their efforts. In other words, in a school with a culture of collegiality and recognition, teachers are more ready to take chances with their practice. Fullan reinforced this concept by citing the findings of McLaughlin and Talbert: "Here collegial support and interaction enable individual teachers to reconsider and revise their classroom practice confidently because department norms are mutually negotiated and understood" (p. 132). Fullan expanded further on this theme of encouraging risk taking in his discussion of the role of the principal in educational reform. One of his six guidelines for principals to help them negotiate through the complexities of leadership during the change process highlights the need for principals to foster through encouragement a safe environment in which teachers can try new teaching strategies. His third guideline states, "Base risk on security (promote risk-taking but provide safety nets of supportive relationships)" (p. 150).

Starratt (2004) conducted further work on the role of leaders' affirmation in encouraging teachers to take risks. In his discussion on ethical leadership, Starratt asserted that an educational leader is under a moral obligation to be fully present to the teachers with whom he or she is working and that one way to be present is to be

affirming. He described affirming presence as deep respect for the abilities of colleagues and freely letting them know about this respect: "Affirming presence involves foregrounding an attitude of unconditional regard for the person or persons you are working with. It means not only holding them in high regard but also explicitly expressing your regard in a variety of ways" (p. 93). Accordingly, the affirming presence of the leader will encourage teachers to take the necessary risks to be effective educators. Starratt clearly portrayed teaching as fraught with risks and the teacher as needing recognition to gather the strength to face those risks:

> It is risky work because, in the process, fragile human beings may be exposed to embarrassment, ridicule, and humiliation in the public forum of the classroom as they struggle to grasp what the teacher and curriculum is asking of them. (p. 95)

This risky work is a little easier to face when recognition rituals such as an awards system are built into the school culture through the work of a leader with an affirming presence. "However those rituals are formalized, one thing will be constant: the visible presence of the leader throughout the building, greeting staff and students, encouraging, cheerleading, supporting, and consoling" (p. 96).

The work of Gordon (2004) further supported the theme of teachers' risk taking being encouraged by recognition. He emphasized in his discussion of school improvement that school leaders must reward the risk takers on staff through recognition and emotional support: "To engage in experimentation and risk taking requires extensive support from administrators and staff developers" (p. 168). This fits very well with the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program (Alberta Education, 2007a), which lists innovation as one of its selection criteria. Charles spoke very clearly about award

recipients feeling supported and affirmed, which allows them the emotional freedom to take risks:

> In psychological parlance, affirmation is tremendously powerful. If you are affirmed, it lets you breathe a little more; it lets you relax and be who you are without thinking about pushing the limits. This is very much part of the PLC culture.

The Excellence in Teaching Awards Program (Alberta Education, 2007a) has mirrored the move toward school communities' adoption of the PLC model of continuous improvement (Alberta Learning, 2003) by changing its selection criteria to include innovation and risk taking as a focus for excellent teaching practice. "The qualifications have changed a bit over the years. . . . Innovation and working with other teachers are important criteria. Recipients see that innovation is valued and therefore become less reluctant to take risks in the future" (F. Burghardt, personal communication, July 27, 2007).

In summary, the literature clearly demonstrates that teachers are more comfortable trying new strategies and experimenting with innovative practices if they have been previously recognized for those kinds of behaviours. It requires an emotional investment on the part of teachers when they take risks in their classrooms. If that emotional investment pays off by way of support and celebration, then those teachers will be more inclined to continue taking risks in the future.

Teacher Recognition and Deprivatization

A third theme that emerged from my discussions with the participants about their experiences is that the awards process opened up their classroom practice and made them feel less isolated. They identified this theme both when they were sharing their ideas of what constitutes a PLC and when they were discussing their involvement in the

nomination process. Each teacher appreciated the fact that a colleague wrote a letter of support, which meant that the colleague took the time to get to know what the teacher was doing in his or her classroom. Also, each teacher appreciated that the principal became familiar with his or her classroom practice and spent time with the teacher prior to writing a letter of support. The literature supported this concept of the need to decrease the privatization of classroom practice and increase the public nature of a teacher's work.

I will begin my discussion of the literature on this theme with the work of DuFour and Eaker (1998) on PLCs as collaborative environments. They described the role of teachers in this kind of environment as follows: "Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (p. xii). DuFour and Eaker emphasized the issue of deprivatizing classrooms: "While traditional teachers labor in isolation, the teachers of a professional learning community share ideas about practice" (p. 219). Marie's description of her PLC of Grade 4 teachers illustrates the opening up of her teaching practice:

> We do everything together. We plan, we teach, we team-teach, we do our special education planning together, we do everything; and we are in the process of trying to help those who come before us and those that come after us to try the same idea.

Her principal, Pierre, echoed this comment:

> It is the hope that through that time they talk about their students, they talk about their teaching, and they try to see how they can better help the students in that way and to contribute to the whole school climate.

Marzano et al. (2005) also attributed effective school leadership to the deprivatization of practice. They believed, as did DuFour and Eaker (1998), that teachers

need the support of one another and the pooling of resources and strategies to increase their effectiveness. "To create the collective efficacy that typifies a purposeful community, the school leader must effectively execute the responsibilities of Optimizer and Affirmation" (p. 101). Marzano et al. discussed the need to make classroom work more public to develop the collective efficacy to which they referred:

> Rather, teachers tend to operate from the perspective that their contribution to student learning is more a function of their individual efforts than the collective efforts of the staff. Given these isolationist tendencies, it is the job of the school leader to foster a belief in the power of collective efficacy. Sergiovanni (2004) refers to this shift in perspective as developing a "community of hope." (p. 101)

As I read the literature on the sharing of practice, I recalled my interview with Josh, who felt that his nomination was a result of his collaborative work with a teacher in his PLC of grade-alike colleagues. He indicated very clearly to me that he felt less isolated and more connected to the rest of the school as a result of working collaboratively with his teaching partner and also as a result of being nominated by his teaching partner. He humbly acknowledged:

> My understanding of a PLC is teachers collaborating together to make life easier for each other and share ideas, thoughts, and plans. Why hold the world to yourself? I found this very, very helpful. I think it is the majority of the reason this whole thing came about, was because I teach across from Darren.

Because Josh was the most recent graduate of a teacher education program, I considered the work of Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005) in the area of the curriculum in teacher education on how teachers learn and develop very relevant. They addressed the reality of more and more schools' implementing the PLC model and the need for new teachers to be prepared to work in such settings: "Purposefully constructed

professional communities that share norms and practices can be especially powerful influences on learning" (p. 388).

Kruse and Louis (1997) emphasizes the need for PLCs of teachers to work toward increasing a teacher's sense of affiliation with colleagues through "de-privatization of practice: Teachers within professional communities are committed to practicing their craft in public ways. They share and trade off the roles of mentor, advisor, or specialist when providing aid to and receiving assistance from peers" (p. 10).

As communities of teachers collaborate and recognize the value of the work that members of the community are doing, isolation decreases, and a sense of shared vision and common goals emerges. Westheimer (1998), in his study *Among School Teachers: Community, Autonomy, and Ideology in Teachers' Work*, concluded that it is important for teachers to "have focus and clarity about their beliefs and values" (p. 138). In his response to my question on how an awards program fits in a PLC, Charles summarized the connection between sharing classroom norms and opening up the classroom:

> All I'm saying is because the PLC culture makes us more aware of what good teaching and good learning looks like, we may be able to bring it out, or we may be able to bring more attention to the people who have traditionally won these awards anyway. In other words, before we might have been more intuitive about good teachers; now we have a yardstick or criterion that always identify them. If you look at effective school literature, it's 30 years old. PLCs is just DuFour's systemization for very practical reasons. All we do now is, we talk about the criteria more; we spend a lot more time demanding improved teacher practice. We really do far more talking about the learning or lack thereof, and so it's more public. It's not a private story any more.

Robin reinforced the ideas of her principal (Charles) when she commented on the fact that teachers in her school would not resent individual awards because the PLC model emphasizes team effort. Robin emphasized that the reduction in classroom isolation helps to create an environment conducive to teaching awards:

> I was a little bit worried that there would be some negativity, but there wasn't. I felt that people in this school were truly, truly happy for those of us who were recognized as finalists. I think part of that is that we all recognize that we got there by support and working with other people who were maybe not recognized but who were equally deserving. I really believe that, working in isolation, we would not be able to do such a good job in the classroom as we can working with a team approach. The PLC model certainly emphasizes that.

Both Charles and Robin also discussed the practice in their school of award recipients' assisting new or struggling teachers as another way of reducing the private nature of teacher practice. Charles was very enthusiastic about his school's offering a new teacher the support of an award nominee:

> As soon as we move into the collaborative model, then we have people being more public. And so I suppose we have more teachers in other teachers' classrooms, so you have more "Holy cow, did you see how they did that?" So we have a winner in our school, and we just had her work with a teacher who was in trouble who'd come in to fill in for a leave, and the teacher was struggling because she was replacing a pretty good teacher. Well, this Excellence in Teaching Award nominee can go in and take this person around to classes so this new teacher is seeing five master teachers' work. I suppose the whole model has created more sharing. We are hoping in our school to make the classroom a more public place, and that has to do with getting rid of the aloneness.

Charles and Robin acknowledged the value of supporting new teachers by visiting them in their classrooms and encouraging them to visit the classrooms of experienced teachers.

In conclusion, the literature concurred that reducing the privacy of teacher practice is of benefit to all in the school community. The literature on sharing teacher practice clearly revealed that teachers can learn a great deal from each other about strengthening their effectiveness and that teachers need the emotional support that comes with this sharing.

Individual Versus Collective Culture

Despite a genuine enthusiasm for the awards program that all of the participants voiced, they were hesitant about the struggle to maintain a spirit of team while singling out an individual for recognition. John, Josh's principal, summarized his concern for this tension between the desire to applaud an individual's performance and the desire to ensure that everyone is treated equally: "It comes back to, we do so much together that we don't want to overemphasize the success of one person." A review of the literature revealed a similar theme.

I will begin my look at the related literature on the theme of this conflict between group goals and individual recognition by referring to Kohn (1993), who conceded that, although he saw rewards as having a negative impact on performance, he also supported the idea of recognizing good work. Kohn's caution about the use of rewards in schools is very clear: "The bottom line is that any approach that offers rewards for better performance is destined to be ineffective" (p. 119). However, he spoke to the dilemma that the participants described about the desire to honour people and, at the same time, avoid any negative impact on others:

> It does not suggest that we ought to hold ourselves back from expressing enthusiasm about what other people have done. It does not imply that we should refrain from making positive comments. . . . On the other hand, I think we are obliged to think very carefully about the potential pitfalls of verbal rewards and how we can avoid them. (p. 106)

This dichotomy to which Kohn referred was evident in the words of Pierre, Marie's principal:

> It's funny because the person getting the nomination sometimes will express to me some hesitancy, because they say, "I don't want to be seen as being different." And yet I've always heard conversations to the opposite from the other colleagues who admire the person, who are happy for the person.

This theme speaks very clearly to the dilemma that faces principals who want to focus on team building and unity of vision while at the same time honouring the individual efforts of staff members. The words of Robin in this study reflect that reluctance of individuals within a PLC to be the center of attention: "It was announced at a staff meeting. There were two of us at the time. I was a little embarrassed at being singled out, but it was nice that there were two of us." Gabriel (2005) summarized this struggle well: "The issue is not how well each person works separately but how well people work together. . . . Yet even if teachers are working and conversing in a professional manner, oftentimes more is necessary. Everyone needs a little cheerleading" (p. 115). The "more" to which he referred is attention to individual accomplishments. Gabriel acknowledged this predicament as a necessary reality in the lives of school administrators. He did not think that the answer would be to avoid all recognition, but rather to be sensitive to balance:

> Some leaders are hesitant to celebrate individual success, achievement, or news publicly because they see it as being unfair to others. This is not necessarily the case. In fact, treating everyone equally can sometimes be the most inequitable thing you can do (think about how you would feel if you were required to turn in lesson plans because someone else had not been engaging in bell-to-bell instruction). It only becomes unfair when you are always recognizing the same person. (p. 116)

Gabriel's comment on the perceived unfairness of one person's being honoured again and again is addressed, I believe, in Alberta's awards program. One of the eligibility criteria is that if a teacher becomes a finalist, he or she is not eligible for nomination for the next three years; and if a teacher wins at the provincial level, he or she is never again eligible for nomination (Alberta Education, 2007a).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) were also very aware of the dilemma facing school leaders who want to strengthen the collective spirit of a PLC but also know the

importance of bringing attention to individual accomplishments. Their work speaks very clearly to the tension between the normative, egalitarian culture of a school and the human need for recognition:

> But the challenge of making celebration an integral part of a school improvement effort is formidable. Recognition of individuals or groups is contrary to the existing culture of most schools. Faculties often adopt an 'all-for-one and one-for-all' approach that discourages calling attention to an individual teacher and responds with suspicion if such attention is given. (pp. 141-142)

Pierre, Marie's principal, drew my attention to this hesitancy on the part of teachers to be recognized within the collective culture: "Some of them are very shy to display their achievements, so it helps to have some friends and friendly faces at the board presentation."

The work of Scribner, Hager, and Warne (2002) has particular relevance in this discussion on the balance between recognizing individual ability and stressing group accomplishments because it focuses on the role of the principal in

> balancing the political tensions among the needs for teacher professional autonomy, individual needs, and organizational goals. The ability of the principals to manage these micropolitical tensions determined the extent to which these leaders were able to foster professional community-like environments. (p. 47)

The findings of Scribner et al.'s study echo the voices of the participants in my study and serve as an effective conclusion to this final theme. Their findings uncover the micropolitical dimensions of PLCs as paradoxical:

> In addition, the micropolitical dimension underscores the efficacy of carefully attending to commingled aspects of professional community (i.e. shared norms and values, focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and collaboration) and the unique and different contexts of individual teachers, schools, and communities. (p. 73)

The general consensus of the literature on the theme of balancing individual and collective needs is that a school culture should include many diverse ways of honouring teacher efforts and accomplishments so that an official external awards program would be just one more method of recognition and celebration.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the appropriateness of a teacher awards program within the context of a PLC. My literature review in chapter 2 investigated the foundations of the teaching profession as normative and egalitarian, the principles of a PLC, the use of rewards in the teaching profession, the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program in Alberta, and the change process as it applies to fitting the awards program into the new culture in schools created by the PLC model. This literature review took an in-depth look at the four themes that emerged from my study of the stories of three award finalists.

I designed this qualitative study to explore my research question on the appropriateness of a formal teacher awards program within the culture of a school that is implementing a PLC model. I have linked the experiences of award finalists with the current literature. My survey of the literature in relation to the identified themes points to the need for school cultures to have processes in place to honour the work of educators, but it also points to the complexities of situating those honouring processes within the PLC model.

CHAPTER 6:

FINDINGS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

This final chapter presents an overview of my research study, conclusions, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and personal reflections. In the overview I summarize the purpose of the study and the methodology that I used. The conclusions focus on the themes that I have identified to present the broad generalizations that arose from the responses to the research questions. The implications for practice come from my review of the literature, my interviews with educators, and my lived experience as a teacher and an administrator. The recommendations for future research suggest areas for further investigation within the topic of implementing a teacher awards program within the context of a PLC.

Overview: Purpose and Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the views of teacher award finalists and their principals on the Excellence in Teacher Awards Program in Alberta as it impacts their work in a PLC. This awards program has been in place in Alberta schools since its inception in 1985 (Alberta Education, 2007a), and many Alberta schools have been implementing the PLC model within the last decade. A considerable amount of research illustrates the characteristics of a PLC and explains the principles involved in implementing the model (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hammerness et al., 2005; Kruse & Louis, 1997; Louis et al., 1996; Mason, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2003; Scribner et al., 2002) However, little research is available on the impact of teacher award programs in general, and even less on the impact within a PLC.

My study addressed the perceptions of teachers who had been selected as finalists in the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program and of their principals who supported their nominations with regard to having an awards program within a school that is implementing the PLC model. In this research I attempted to place the current literature and the views of educators on teachings awards within the context of a PLC.

Methodology

I chose the research methodology that I used for this study to gain insights into the process of using a teacher awards program within the culture of a school that is implementing the PLC model. I undertook a qualitative study (Creswell, 2003) using a constructivist approach and assuming multiple socially constructed realities, with an interactive link between the participants and myself (Mertens, 1998). I also used a case study approach and chose to interview three teacher finalists and their principals. I used semistructured, taped interviews and conducted two interviews with each subject, each session lasting about 45 minutes. Following the first interview with each participant, I listened to the recording of the session, transcribed the interview, shared the transcript with the participant, and then met for the second interview session.

The data analysis process began during the first interview session and continued as I listened to the recordings and transcribed the sessions. I conducted a content analysis of all of the data that I gathered and developed categories and themes, and then I discussed the emerging themes with my advisor and finally decided on four themes that present the central ideas important to an awards process within a PLC.

Findings

The overarching research question that guided my study was, Is a formal teacher awards program an appropriate fit within the culture of a school that is implementing a PLC model? To organize this study effectively and to respond to the research question, I identified four themes that emerged during the interviews with my respondents. I transformed those four themes into questions, and my findings focus on the responses to the theme questions, which are stated below:

1. Is it appropriate to recognize teacher success within the context of a PLC?
2. Does teacher recognition through a formal awards program encourage risk taking in teacher practice?
3. Does teacher recognition through a formal awards program further the PLC goal of deprivatizing teacher practice?
4. Is it possible to implement a formal awards program in such a way that both individual and collective needs are met?

The findings represent both the literature review investigation and the observations of the respondents during the interviews. Because I dealt at length with each theme in chapter 5, I will present a summary here rather than restating the complete set of findings and interpretations for each theme.

Is It Appropriate to Recognize Teacher Success Within the Context of a Professional Learning Community?

In my analysis of the perceptions of the teachers in this study, I found that it is very important for a school community that is implementing the PLC model to recognize and celebrate teacher success. Although the participants' schools were at varying stages of the implementation process of the model, the three teachers and three principals felt

that it is significant to a teacher to have his or her practice acknowledged, especially in the presence of colleagues, and to recognize teacher practice in the larger school community, but they considered collegial sharing the greatest priority.

The participants gave a variety of reasons for the importance of acknowledging and celebrating successful teacher practice among colleagues. The most common reason was that the celebration lifts the emotional spirit of the recognized teacher and provides a sense of joy for everyone involved, not only the recipient. A second reason was that the celebration reminded everyone of the school's high standards and the satisfaction that comes with reaching those standards. One recipient talked about feeling motivated to continue to try to be worthy of the selection criteria cited in his nomination package. The principals were consistent in their observation that celebrating the accomplishments of team members is effective in serving as a model for less experienced teachers.

As well, the teachers and principals whom I interviewed felt that there should be some consistency within a school jurisdiction with regard to how the awards program is implemented in individual schools within the district. They considered it unfortunate that some schools advertise and support the awards program more than other schools do and emphasized the importance of each school community's giving its members uniform access to the awards information so that all teachers feel that they have an equal opportunity to be nominated.

None of the six participants indicated that it is necessary or advisable to move away from teacher awards now that his or her school was using the PLC model. Although all participants expressed a sensitivity to the needs of all teachers in a PLC, which I will discuss further in theme 4, they also all agreed that their concern was more a matter of attending to the awards process rather than eliminating it.

Does Teacher Recognition Through a Formal Awards Program Encourage Risk Taking in Teacher Practice?

Reflected in the comments of the participants was the concept that both the award recipients and their principals felt that the presence of the Alberta awards system in a school using the PLC model encourages teachers to try new strategies and take risks with their teaching practices. The participants emphasized the sense of support and appreciation for trying new things that comes from an awards program that lists innovative or creative teaching as a criterion. My study reveals that when their parents, colleagues, and leaders affirm teachers, they tend to feel more confident in stretching to reach higher standards. As in the first theme, leaders' affirmation and encouragement of teachers' risk taking is grounded in relationship building. The participants made it very clear that acknowledgement of their efforts gave them the strength and courage to take risks and be creative in facing challenges in their classrooms.

Does Teacher Recognition Through a Formal Awards Program Further the Professional Learning Community Goal of Deprivatizing Teacher Practice?

It became clear during my study of these Alberta teachers that there is a good fit between the goal of a PLC to encourage teachers to collaborate and share practice (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program requirement that a colleague and the principal write letters of support for the nomination. The teachers and principals appreciated the opportunity that this affords nominees to open their classrooms to the colleague and the principal who are writing these letters. The nominees and the letter writers could use this opportunity to discuss teaching practice and, in some schools, observe the nominee's classroom. As Charles mentioned in referring to the environment of a PLC, "It's not a private story any more."

Based also on my own experiences as a principal in a school that is implementing the PLC model, I conclude that it furthers the goal of teacher collaboration and shared practice when the writers of letters of support spend time in the nominee's classroom and in discussions about his or her best practices.

Is It Possible to Implement a Formal Awards Program in Such a Way That Both Individual and Collective Needs Are Met?

This research study indicates that school administrators face a challenge in incorporating an awards system into the culture of a school that is implementing the PLC model. Each participant mentioned the need for schools to pay careful attention to the sensitivities of those teachers who do not receive nominations while at the same time paying attention to the honoured teachers. Although the participants clearly spoke in favour of an awards program, they were also concerned about the potential for some teachers to feel left out or unappreciated. There was also consensus among the recipients on the need for school leaders to handle the recognition in a manner that will not embarrass or make the award recipients uncomfortable. The participants felt that it was necessary to ensure that there are many diverse ways of honouring teacher efforts and accomplishments so that the Alberta awards program is just one more method of recognition and celebration.

Implications for Practice

This study has implications based upon the review of the literature, the research findings, and my experiences as an administrator and teacher. I present the following implications for practicing school administrators, school jurisdictions, and provincial

administrators of the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program for deliberation and reflection.

School Administrators

It is clear from the literature, the participants' observations, and my experiences that school administrators within a PLC should provide diverse opportunities for the school community to recognize and celebrate teacher efforts and accomplishments and that staff meetings are an excellent venue for highlighting teacher success. Alberta school administrators should take advantage of the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program as one opportunity to draw attention to teacher excellence, and they must ensure that there are other venues to recognize teachers who are not nominated for an Excellence in Teaching Award.

Second, school administrators should use all methods of celebrating teacher success, including the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program, as a way of encouraging teachers to try new strategies and be creative in their practice. It is important that school administrators understand the strength and courage that it takes for teachers to be innovative in their classrooms; therefore, administrators need to support and foster risk taking by acknowledging and honouring the behaviour.

Third, school administrators need to help classroom teachers open up their teaching practice and tell teaching stories. One very effective way to deprivatize teaching practice is to encourage members of the school community to nominate deserving teachers to help colleagues learn more about the nominee's work, and it also allows the principal a chance to visit the nominee's classroom and share the good story with staff.

School Jurisdictions

Ensuring that the implementation of an awards program is consistent across a school district is a challenging but necessary task for board members and the senior administrators of a school jurisdiction. Because the sense of justice with regard to an awards program is very important to teachers, it is essential that school jurisdictions be intentional and deliberate in assisting principals in implementing the program at the school level. Jurisdictions and school administrators must pay attention to the potential unevenness with which schools participate in the program and must take measures to ensure that teachers in all schools feel that there is an equal opportunity for excellent practice to be recognized. Also, jurisdictions and school administrators attention must ensure that parents have adequate support in completing the nomination package so that all teachers in the district know that any appreciative parent can participate in the nomination process.

Administrators of the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program

My final implications for future practice are directed at the administrators of Alberta's Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. As my conversation with F. Burghardt, Director of Alberta Education's Teacher Development and Certification from 1993 to 2003 (personal communication, July 27, 2007) indicated, the awards program currently has no guidelines to help jurisdictions and school principals to ensure that all teachers have an equal opportunity to be recognized for excellence in their practice. Perhaps the awards program administrators could create a handbook to accompany the nomination package that would offer suggestions for school jurisdictions and administrators on how to implement the program, which then might ensure consistency across the province in terms of equal opportunity for teachers to be

recognized. This handbook could also advise supporting teachers and principals to observe the nominated teacher's classroom to gather material for the letters of support. One final purpose that this handbook could serve is to draw the attention of the school and district administrators to the use of term *recipient* rather than *winner* within the awards process. Although the award administrators are conscious of the need to refer to those who move on in the awards process as recipients, the school community continues to use the term winners, which implies that those who do not move on are 'losers.' That implication, which is not the intent of the program, could be a source of the tension to which I referred earlier.

I also suggest that the administrators of the awards program consider reviewing the selection criteria to determine whether they reflect the principles of a PLC model. When the awards program was first introduced in 1985, the selection criteria were based on the current thought in the educational landscape on what constitutes excellent teaching practice. Although F. Burghardt (personal communication, July 27, 2007) reported that some changes have been made recently to reflect new thinking in education, I feel that a more complete review of the selection criteria should be undertaken, given the provincial recommendation that all schools in Alberta adopt the PLC model.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is now a significant amount of research available on the implementation of the PLC model. However, I recommend further studies on the process of recognizing individual teacher efforts and accomplishments within the context of the PLC model to foster a richer appreciation of the complexities of balancing the need to maintain a team spirit among staff members with the need to single out individuals for recognition. The

principals in my study were administering the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program based on good faith and instinct, but they affirmed that they need guidance, and perhaps this guidance could come from further research on the principles involved in recognizing individual teachers within a PLC.

In addition, I recommend that a comparative study of existing teacher awards systems in a variety of school jurisdictions be conducted to inform the current practice of school leaders in their administration of awards programs. Further research on the experiences of other jurisdictions would also supplement the good faith and instinct of principals as they attempt to implement the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program. Because I interviewed a small number of teachers and principals from schools located in a small, prosperous urban setting of about 60,000 people, it would be beneficial to interview teachers and principals in; for example, a variety of rural settings and both inner-core and suburban settings of a large city.

In addition, it would be beneficial to include in further research on the implementation of an awards program the insights of teachers who have not been nominated. Their stories might garner insight into a diversity of ways to honour the work of teachers.

One final recommendation for future study is in the area of the relationship between the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program (Alberta Education, 2007a) and the ATA. The ATA supported the inception of both the Council of Alberta Teaching Standards and the awards program, and a representative from the ATA sat on the awards program committee. Although the ATA withdrew its support of the awards for a few years in the late 1990s, it currently has a representative on the awards committee. (F. Burghardt, personal communication, July 27, 2007). I therefore recommend further

exploration of the fit between the principles of the awards program and the principles of the ATA.

Personal Reflections

This study began to take root in my mind when I was the principal of an elementary school, faced with the challenge of motivating and inspiring teachers. I worked hard to nurture the teaching spirit and recognized and celebrated teacher success in many ways, but I was always concerned about the staff's perception of the fairness of that recognition. Throughout my graduate coursework this topic continued to be of interest. As I concluded this study, I began to understand that balancing honouring individuals with acknowledging teamwork within a PLC is part of the intellectual work of school administrators.

The work of Cochran-Smith (1991) on the distinction between a problem of teaching and a dilemma in teaching struck a very deep chord within me: "A problem is a question posed for solution or at least action, a situation that may be perplexing and difficult, but not one that is ultimately unapproachable" (p. 299). I now see the logistics of ensuring that the Alberta Excellence in Teaching Awards Program (Alberta Education, 2007a) is an equal opportunity program and that all teachers in Alberta have the same opportunity to receive recognition for excellent practices as a problem that actions can be taken to resolve. I have addressed those actions with implications for practice that will involve principals, senior district administrators, and provincial administrators of the awards program in improving the communication and implementation process.

Cochran-Smith's (1991) definition of a dilemma in teaching seems to get at the deeper moral or ethical issues of the fairness of teacher recognition: "A dilemma . . . is a

situation of teaching that presents two or more logical alternatives, the loss of either of which is equally unfavorable and disagreeable. A dilemma poses two or more competing claims to justice, fairness, and morality" (p. 299). The dilemma of teacher awards is that one alternative is not to participate at all, which many in the school community might perceive as disagreeable; the second alternative is to participate in a teacher awards program, which many in the school community might also perceive as disagreeable. I believe that this creates tough intellectual work for school administrators. Cochran-Smith explained:

> Borrowing language from Lampert (1985) and Berlak and Berlak (1981), I refer to this form of intellectual work as *confronting the dilemmas of teaching,* a process of identifying and wrestling with educational issues that are characterized by equally strong but incompatible and competing claims to justice. (p. 297)

I too have come to understand that the issue of teacher awards in the culture of a school's PLC involves the language of both teaching problems and teaching dilemmas.

As I listened to the recipients in this study describe the emotional and spiritual lift that they received from their recognition and their deeply felt concerns for the feelings of their unrecognized colleagues, I decided that this is a dilemma worthy of the struggle and that educators are up for the challenge. How in the future will they tackle this important teaching dilemma?

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APPENDIX A:

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Teacher questions:

1. My understanding is that you were nominated for an Excellence in Teaching Award and you were selected as a finalist.
    a. When did this happen?
    b. Could you please briefly describe the size and structure of the school at which you were teaching at the time of the nomination?
    c. What were you teaching at the time of the nomination?
2. Could you please share with me briefly your understanding of the concept of a school as a professional learning community?
3. From your perspective, to what degree would your school be described as a professional learning community?
4. Suppose I am a teacher finalist in this school. What would that experience be like for me?
5. How has your teaching practice been affected by your being recognized as a finalist for this award?
6. Some people would say that the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program does not belong in a school which has as one of its goal being a professional learning community What would you say to them?
7. Suppose you are the principal of a school, how would you handle the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program?
8. Would you say the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program is an appropriate way to celebrate and recognize teachers? Why or why not?

Administrator questions:

1. It is my understanding that you were the principal of a school in which a teacher was nominated and selected as a finalist in the Excellence in Teaching Award program.
    a. When did this happen?
    b. Could you please briefly describe the size and structure of the school of which you were the principal at the time of the nomination?

2. Could you please share with me briefly your understanding of the concept of a school as a professional learning community?

3. From your perspective, to what degree would your school be described as a professional learning community?

4. Why do you advertise and support the nominations of teachers for an Excellence in Teaching Award?

5. How do you handle the communication to your staff and school community about a teacher on your staff being successful in this awards process?

6. What do you think the ideal teacher awards program would be like?

7. Some people would say that the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program does not belong in a school which has one of its goal being a professional learning community What would you say to them?

8. Would you say the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program is an appropriate way to celebrate and recognize teachers? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B:

LETTER OF INFORMATION: TEACHER/PRINCIPAL

April 9, 2007

Dear teacher/principal colleague,

My name is Glenys Edwards, and I am currently conducting research as part of my study as a graduate student at the University of Alberta in Educational Administration and Leadership in the Department of Educational Policy Studies. The reason for this letter is to invite you to participate in my research project titled ***Teaching Awards in the Context of a Professional Learning Community.*** The purpose of my research project is to investigate the views about the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program from the perspective of nominated teachers who have become finalists, and from their principals. Your participation in this study will provide useful and valuable information about how educators perceive the teaching awards process. It is my hope that the findings and recommendations of my study will inform the future practice of participation in the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program within the current context of schools as professional learning communities. This study will take place over the next six months, with a goal for completion of December 2007, and will be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education.

Your involvement in this study would consist of two, 45 minute interviews, at a location convenient for you. These will be tape recorded and transcribed. I will be using the services of a transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. A copy of all transcripts will be made available to you to review, edit, and to delete any passages you do not want included in the study. All information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure maintaining privacy and confidentiality. No information will be included that could identify you or your school. Although there are no foreseeable physical risks to the participants in this study, you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time and the information you have given would not be used in the study. While I am conducting my research, all notes and tape-recording will be secured at my home, and this material will be destroyed after five years.

The data collected will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants http://www.ualberta.ca/~unisecr/policy/sec66.html The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751. My research findings will be used only in my Master of Education thesis document and in associated publications or presentations. You can request and will be given a copy of the final written report sometime after December 2007.

I am very grateful for your consideration of joining this study. If you would like to participate in this research project, please read and sign the attached Consent Form. You may return it by mail to the address below, or you can bring it to the first interview session. If you have any questions or need more information, please feel free to contact me at 780-458-0186 (home) or 780-459-4426 (work) or at edwardsg@spschools.org.

Yours truly,

Glenys Edwards
Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
Mailing address: Glenys Edwards, 20 Lockhart Drive, St. Albert, T8N 2V1

APPENDIX C:

WRITTEN CONSENT FORM: TEACHER/PRINCIPAL

Study Name: *Teaching Awards in the Context of a Professional Learning Community*

Researcher: Glenys P. Edwards (780-458-0186 or 780-459-4426)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Rosemary Foster (780-492-0760)

Department Chair: Dr. Frank Peters (780-492-7607)

The purpose of this research is to investigate views about the Excellence in Teaching Awards Program which is presented by Alberta Education (2007) from the perspective of nominated teachers who have become finalists, and from their principals. This project is being conducted as a partial requirement for a Master of Education.

My signature on this form indicates I have understood the information regarding participation as described in the accompanying letter of information. My signature does not release the researcher, sponsors, or involved institution from their legal or professional responsibilities, nor does it waive my legal rights. The nature of my participation is completely voluntary. I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. I may also choose not to answer particular questions, without prejudice or consequence. My continued participation should be as informed as my initial consent; therefore, I will have the right to ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation. I also have the right to contact the researcher, research supervisor, or department chair if I have any concerns or questions about the research project.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Participant's Signature: _____ ***Date:*** _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ ***Date:*** _____